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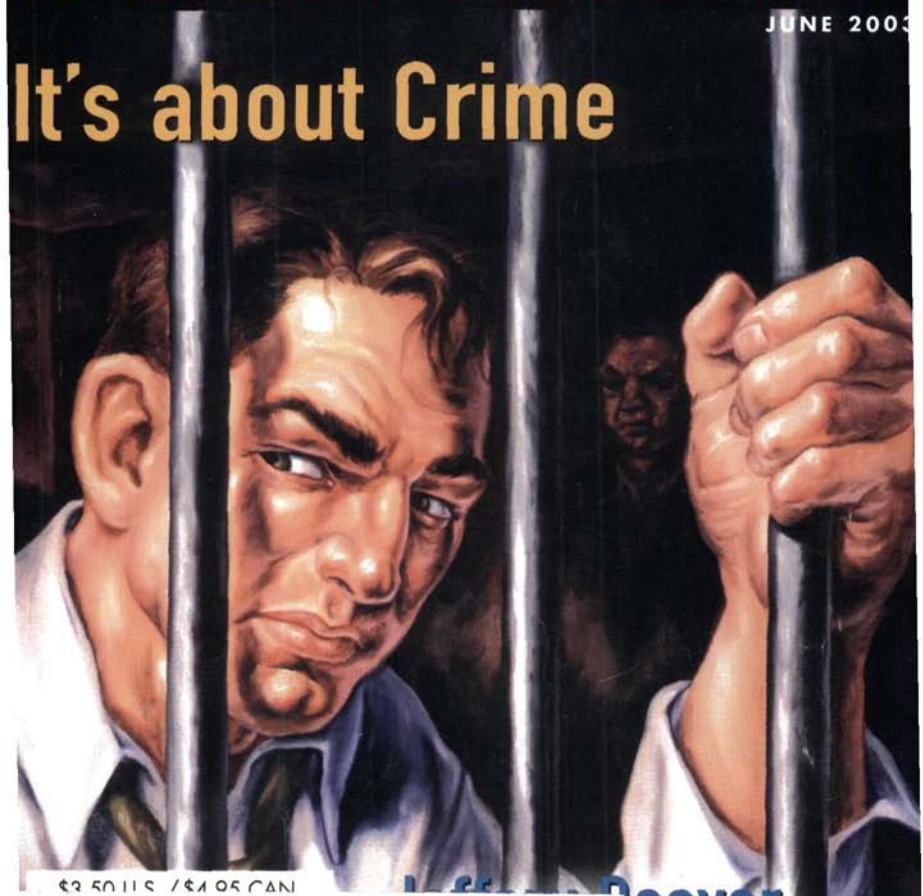

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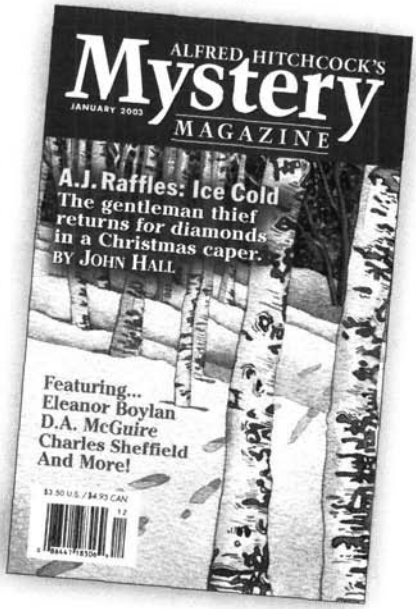

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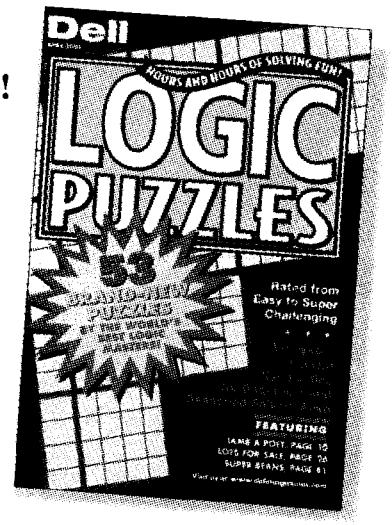

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JUNE 2003

CONTENTS

Hunted
Page 52

Buried treasure?
Page 74

Cover Illustration by
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Note: indicia on
page 143

FICTION

Copycat BY JEFFERY DEAVER 4
Farber Is Clueless
BY GORDON COTLER 42
School Daze BY BUDGE BURGESS 52
My Little Brother
BY EDWARD CLINTON 66
The Woman in the Woods
BY MALCOLM SHUMAN 74
Needlecraft BY DONALD OLSON 86
M. le Médecin's Wives
BY JUDITH CUTLER 94
Leopold Kidnapped
BY EDWARD D. HOCH 103
The Talking Dead
BY MELODIE JOHNSON HOWE 121
The Plater BY ANN CLEEVES 134

POETRY

Crime Bakery BY BRANDY RABIN 85

REVIEWS

The Jury Box BY JON L. BREEN 29

PASSPORT TO CRIME

Introduction 32
Violence Against a Defenceless Woman
BY RICHARD MACKER 33

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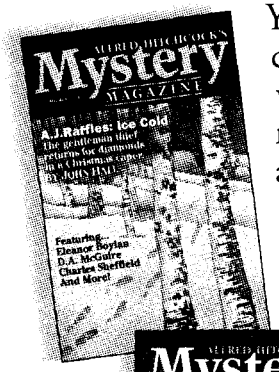

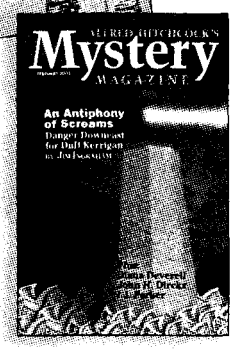

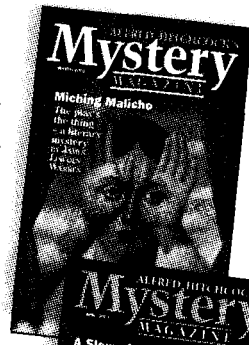

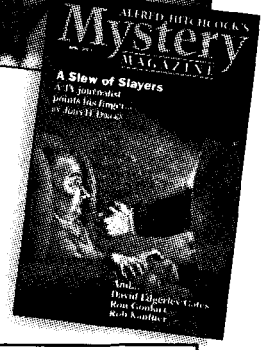

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Art by Daniel Galanaugh

COPYCAT

by Jeffery Deaver

He'd never revived a cold case in quite this way.

Detective Quentin Altman rocked back, his chair squealing with the telltale caw of ageing government furniture, and eyed the narrow, jittery man sitting across from him.

"Go on," the cop said.

"So I check out this book from the library. Just for the fun of it. I never do that, just read a book for the fun of it. I mean, never. I don't get much time off, you know."

Altman hadn't known this, but he could certainly have deduced it. Gordon Wallace was the *Greenville Tribune*'s sole crime reporter and must've spent sixty, seventy hours a week banging out copy, to judge by the number of stories appearing under his byline every day.

"And I'm reading along and—"

"What is it you're reading?"

"A murder mystery. I'll get to that. . . . I'm reading along and I'm irritated," the reporter continued, "because somebody'd circled some passages. In a library book."

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Altman grunted distractedly. He was head of Homicide in a burg with a small-town name but big-city crime statistics. The fifty-something detective was busy and he didn't have much time for reporters with crackpot theories. There were twenty-two folders of current cases on his desk and here Wallace was delivering some elliptical message about defaced books.

"I don't pay much attention at first, but I go back and reread one of the circled paragraphs. It jogs my memory. Anyway, I checked the morgue—"

"Morgue?" Altman frowned, rubbing his wiry red hair, which showed not a strand of gray.

"Our morgue, not yours. In the newspaper office. All the old stories."

"Got it. How 'bout getting to the point?"

"I found the articles about the Kimberly Banning murder."

Altman grew more attentive. Twenty-eight-year-old Kimberly had been strangled to death a year ago. The murder occurred two weeks after a similar killing—of a young female grad student. The two deaths appeared to be the work of the same person, but there were few forensic leads and no motive that anyone could determine. The cases prompted a task-force investigation but eventually the suspects dried up and blew away like maple leaves in October, and soon the case grew cold.

Tall and gaunt, with tendons and veins rising from his pale skin, Wallace tried to tone down his intimidating physique and face with brown tweed jackets, corduroy slacks, and pastel shirts, an attempt that was, as today, completely unsuccessful. He asked the cop, "You remember how the whole town was paranoid after the first girl was killed? And how everybody was double-locking their doors and never letting strangers into their houses?"

Altman nodded.

"Well, look at this." The reporter pulled latex gloves out of his pocket and put them on.

"Why the gloves, Wallace?"

The man ignored the question and dug a book out of his battered briefcase. Altman got a look at the title. *Two Deaths in a*

"Readers familiar with my books know that I love to trick my audience with sleight of hand," said Jeffery Deaver in a recent interview. And so he found it natural in the latest Lincoln Rhyme novel, *The Vanished Man* (S&S), to write about the subject of illusion. The novel's master criminal is a psychotic magician; its "plotting and pacing," said *PW*, "—featuring twist upon twist and reversal upon reversal—are nothing short of dazzling, reminiscent of Agatha Christie at her best."

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Small Town. He'd never heard of it.

"This was published six months before the first killing." He opened the book to a yellow Post-It tab and pushed it forward. "Read those paragraphs." The detective pulled on his CVS drugstore glasses and leaned forward.

> The hunter knew that now that he'd killed once, the town would be more alert than ever. Its soul would be edgier, its collective nerves would be as tense as an animal trap's blue-steel spring. Women would not stroll the streets alone, and those who did would be looking around themselves constantly, alert for any risk. Only a fool would let a stranger into her house and the hunter did not enjoy killing fools.
>
> So on Tuesday night he waited until nearly bedtime—eleven P.M.—and then slipped onto Maple Street. There, he doused a parked convertible's roof with gasoline and ignited the pungent, amber liquid. A huge *whoosh*. . . . He hid in the bushes and, hypnotized by the tornado of flames and ebony smoke swirling into the night sky above the dying car, he waited. In ten minutes behemoths of fire trucks roared up the street, their wailing sirens drawing people from their homes to find out what the excitement might be.
>
> Among those on the sidewalk was a young, demure blonde with a heart-shaped face, Clara Steading. This was the woman the hunter knew he had to possess—possess completely. She was love incarnate, *amore* herself, she was beauty, she was passion . . . and she was also completely ignorant of her role as the object of his demented desire. Clara shivered in her bathrobe, standing on the sidewalk along with a clutch of chattering neighbors as they watched the firemen extinguish the blaze and offered words of sympathy to the dismayed owner of the car, who lived a few doors away.
>
> Finally the onlookers grew bored, or repulsed by the bitter smell of the burnt rubber and plastic, and they returned to their beds or their late-night snacks or their mind-numbing TV. But their vigilance didn't flag; the moment they stepped inside, every one of them locked their doors and windows carefully—to make certain that the strangler would not wreak his carnage in their homes.
>
> Though in Clara Steading's case, her diligence in securing the deadbolt and chains had a somewhat different effect: locking the hunter inside with her.

"Jesus," Altman muttered. "That's just what happened in the Banning case, how the perp got inside. He set fire to a car."

"A convertible," Wallace added. "And then I went back and found another passage that'd been circled. When I'd read it at first I didn't pay any attention. But you know what it said? It was how the killer had stalked the first victim by pretending to work for the city and trimming the plants in a park across from her apartment."

This was just how the first victim of the Greenville Strangler, the pretty grad student, had been stalked.

"So the killer's a copycat," Altman murmured. "He used the

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novel for research."

Which meant that there could be evidence in the book that might lead to the perp: fingerprints, ink, handwriting.

Altman stared at the brooding cover—a drawing of a man's silhouette peering into the window of a house. The detective pulled on his own pair of latex gloves and slipped the book into an evidence envelope. He nodded at the reporter and said a heartfelt, "Thanks. We haven't had a lead on this one in over eight months."

Walking into the office next to his—that of his assistant, a young crew-cut detective named Josh Randall—he instructed the man to take the book to the county lab for analysis. When he returned, Wallace was still sitting expectantly in the hard chair across from Altman's desk.

Altman wasn't surprised he hadn't left. "And the quid pro quo?" the detective asked. "For your good deed?"

"I want an exclusive. What else?"

"I figured."

Altman didn't mind this in theory; cold cases were bad for the department's image and solving cold cases was good for a cop's career. Not to mention that there was still a killer out there. He'd never liked Wallace, though, who always seemed a little out of control in a spooky way and was as irritating as most crusaders usually are.

"Okay, you've got an exclusive," Altman said. "I'll keep you posted." He rose and shook the reporter's hand. Waited for him to leave.

"Oh, I'm not going anywhere, my friend."

"This's an official investigation—"

"And it wouldn't've been one without me. I want to write this one from the inside out. Tell my readers how a homicide investigation works from your point of view."

Altman argued some more, but in the end he gave in; he felt he had no choice. He said, "Just don't get in my way. If you get in the way, you're out of here."

"Wouldn't think of it." He frowned an eerie look into his long, toothy face. "I might even be helpful." Maybe it was a joke, but there was nothing humorous about the delivery. He then looked up expectantly at the detective. "So, whadda we do next?"

"Well, you're going to cool your heels. I'm going to review the case file."

"But—"

"Relax, Wallace. Investigations take time. Sit back, take your jacket off. Enjoy our wonderful coffee."

Wallace glanced at the closet that served as the police station's canteen. He rolled his eyes and the ominous tone of earlier was replaced with a laugh. "Funny. I didn't know they still made instant."

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The detective winked and ambled down the hall on his aching bones.

Quentin Altman hadn't run the Greenville Strangler case himself.

He'd worked on it some—the whole department had had a piece of the case—but the officer in charge had been Bob Fletcher, a sergeant who'd been on the force for years. Fletcher, who'd never remarried after his wife left him some years before and was childless, had devoted his life to his job after the divorce and seemed to take his inability to solve the strangler case hard; the soft-spoken man had actually given up a senior spot in Homicide and transferred to Robbery. Altman was now glad, for the sergeant's sake, that there was a chance to nail the killer who'd eluded him.

Altman wandered down to Robbery with the news about the book and to see if Fletcher knew anything about it. The sergeant, though, was out in the field at the moment and so Altman left him a message and then dove into the cluttered and oppressively hot records room. He found the strangler files easily; the folders sported red stripes on the side, a harsh reminder that, while this might've been a cold case, it was still very much open.

Returning to his office, he sat back, sipping the, yes, disgusting instant coffee, and read the file, trying to ignore Wallace's incessant scribbling on his steno pad, the scratchy noise irritatingly audible across the office. The events of the murders were well documented. The perp had broken into two women's apartments and strangled them. There'd been no rape, sexual molestation, or postmortem mutilation. Neither woman had ever been stalked or threatened by former boyfriends, and though Kimberly had recently purchased some condoms, none of her friends knew that she'd been dating. The other victim, Becky Winthrop, her family said, hadn't dated for over a year.

Sergeant Fletcher had carried out a by-the-book investigation, but most killings of this sort, without witnesses, motive, or significant trace found at the scene, are not solved without the help of an informant—often a friend or acquaintance of the perp. But, despite extensive press coverage of the investigation and pleas on TV by the mayor and Fletcher, no one had come forward with any information about possible suspects.

An hour later, just as he closed the useless file, Altman's phone rang. A forensic lab tech at the county police told him that they had been through the book page by page and found three passages underlined and starred with large asterisks. In addition to the two that Wallace had found, there was a passage about how the killer had put plastic bags around his shoes to prevent leaving footprints and to keep trace evidence from sloughing off at the crime scene.

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Altman gave a short laugh. The report that he'd just read contained a note that the crime-scene searchers hadn't been able to figure out why the perp had left no footprints.

Because the goddamn killer had used a goddamn how-to book, the detective thought bitterly.

The tech continued: Next to two of the underscored passages were several handwritten notations. One said, "Check this one out. Important." And the other: "Used distraction—brilliant."

The documents department had blown up images of the handwriting and was prepared to compare these to any samples found elsewhere, though until such samples were found they could do nothing more.

The techs had also checked for any impression evidence—to see if the killer had written something on, say, a Post-It note on top of one of the pages—but found nothing.

A ninhydrin analysis revealed a total of nearly two hundred latent fingerprints on the three pages on which the paragraphs had been underlined. Unfortunately, many of them were old and were only fragments. Technicians had located a few that were clear enough to be identified and had run them through the FBI's automatic fingerprint identification system in West Virginia. But all the results had come back negative.

The cover of the book, wrapped in print-friendly cellophane, yielded close to four hundred prints, but they, too, were mostly smudges and fragments. AFIS had provided no positive IDs for these, either.

Frustrated, Altman thanked the technician as cordially as he could and hung up.

"So what was that about?" Wallace asked, looking eagerly at the sheet of paper in front of Altman, which contained both notes on the conversation he'd just had and a series of compulsive doodles.

He explained to the reporter about the forensic results.

"So, no leads," Wallace summarized dramatically and jotted a note, the irritated detective wondering why the reporter had actually found it necessary to write this observation down.

As he gazed at the reporter an idea occurred to Altman and he stood up abruptly. "Let's go."

"Where?"

"Your crime scene."

"Mine?" Wallace asked, scrambling to follow the detective as he strode out the door.

The library near Gordon Wallace's apartment, where he'd checked out the novel, was a small branch in the Three Pines neighborhood of Greenville, so named because legend had it that three trees in a park here had miraculously survived the fire of 1829,

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which had destroyed the rest of the town. It was a nice place, populated mostly by businessmen, professionals, and educators; the college was nearby (the same school where the first strangler victim had been a student).

Altman followed Wallace inside and the reporter found the head of the branch and introduced her to the detective. Mrs. McGiver was a trim woman dressed in stylish gray; she looked more like a senior executive with a high-tech company than a librarian.

The detective explained the connection between the person who'd checked out the book and the murders, shock registering on the woman's face as she realized that the killer was somebody who'd been to her library. Perhaps even someone she knew.

"I'd like a list of everybody who checked out that book." Altman had considered the possibility that the killer might not have checked it out but had looked through it here, in the library itself. But that meant he'd have to underline the passages in public and risk drawing the attention of librarians or patrons. He concluded that the only safe way for the strangler to do his homework was at home.

"I'll see what I can find," she said.

Altman had thought that it might take days to pull together this information, but Mrs. McGiver was back in minutes. Altman felt his gut churning with excitement as he gazed at the sheets of paper in her hand, relishing the sensations of the thrill of the hunt and pleasure at finding a fruitful lead.

But as he flipped through the sheets, he frowned. Every one of the thirty or so people checking out *Two Deaths* had done so recently—within the last six months. They needed the names of those who'd checked it out before the killings a year ago.

"Actually, I need to see the list before July tenth of last year," he explained.

"Oh, but we don't have records that far back. Normally we would, but about six months ago our computer was vandalized."

"Vandalized?"

She nodded, frowning. "Somebody poured battery acid or something into the hard drive. Ruined it and destroyed all our records. Backup, too. Somebody from your department handled the case. I don't remember who."

Wallace said, "I didn't hear about it."

"They never found who did it. It was very troubling, but more of an inconvenience than anything. Imagine if he'd decided to destroy the books themselves."

Altman caught Wallace's eye. "Dead end," he muttered angrily. Then he asked the librarian, "How 'bout the names of everybody who had a library card then? Were their names in the computer, too?"

"Prior to six months ago, they're gone, too. I'm sorry."

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Forcing a smile onto his face, he thanked the librarian and walked to the doorway. But he stopped so suddenly that Wallace nearly slammed into his back.

"What?" the reporter asked.

Altman ignored him and returned to the desk, calling as he did, "Mrs. McGiver! Hold up there!" Drawing stares and a couple of harsh *shhhh*'s from readers.

"I need to find out where somebody lives."

"I'll try, but you're the policeman--don't you have ways of doing that?"

"In this case, I have a feeling you'd be a better cop than me."

The author of *Two Deaths in a Small Town,* Andrew M. Carter, lived in Hampton Station, near Albany, about two hours away from Greenville.

Mrs. McGiver's copy of *Who's Who in Contemporary Mystery Writing* didn't include addresses or phone numbers, but Altman called the felonies division of the Albany police department and they tracked down Carter's address and number.

Altman's theory was that Carter might've gotten a fan letter from the killer. Since one notation called a passage "brilliant" and the other appeared to be a reminder to do more research on the topic, it was possible that the killer had written to Carter to praise him or to ask for more information. If there was such a letter, the county forensic handwriting expert could easily link the notation with the fan, who—if they were lucky—might have signed his real name and included his address.

Mentally crossing his fingers, he placed a call to the author. A woman answered. "Hello?"

"I'm Detective Altman with the Greenville police department," he said. "I'd like to speak to Andrew Carter."

"I'm his wife," she said. "He's not available." The matter-of-fact tone in her voice suggested that this was her knee-jerk response to all such calls.

"When will he be available?"

"This is about the murders, isn't it?"

"That's right, ma'am."

"Do you have a suspect?"

"I can't really go into that. But I would like to talk to your husband."

A hesitation. "The thing is . . ." Her voice lowered and Altman suspected that her "unavailable" husband was in a nearby room. "He hasn't been well."

"I'm sorry," Altman said. "Is it serious?"

"You bet it's serious," she said angrily. "When Andy heard that the killer might've used his book as a model for the crimes, he got

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very depressed. He cut himself off from everybody. He stopped writing." She hesitated. "He stopped everything. He just gave up."

"Must've been real difficult, Mrs. Carter," Altman said sympathetically.

"I told him it was just a coincidence—those women getting killed like he wrote in the book. Just a weird coincidence. But the reporters and, well, everybody, friends, neighbors . . . they kept yammering on and on about how Andy was to blame."

Altman supposed she wasn't going to like the fact that he'd found proof that her husband's book had indeed been the model for the killings.

She continued, "He's been getting better lately. Anything about the case could set him back."

"I do understand that, ma'am, but you have to see my situation. We've got a possibility of catching the killer and your husband could be real helpful. . . ."

The sound on the other end of the line grew muffled and Altman could hear her talking to someone else.

Altman wasn't surprised when she said, "My husband just got back. I'll put him on."

"Hello?" came a soft, uneasy voice. "This's Andy Carter."

Altman identified himself.

"Are you the policeman I talked to last year?"

"Me? No. That might've been the case detective. Sergeant Bob Fletcher."

"Right. That was the name."

So Fletcher had talked to the author last year. There was no reference in the case file to it and he supposed that Carter hadn't provided any helpful information. Maybe now, after this much time had passed, he'd be more cooperative.

Though Altman soon found that wasn't the case.

He reiterated to Carter what he'd told his wife and the man said immediately, "I can't help you. And frankly, I don't want to. . . . This's been the worst year of my life."

"I appreciate that, sir. But that killer's still free. And—"

"But I don't know anything. I mean, what could I possibly tell you that—"

"We have a sample of the killer's handwriting—we found some of his notes in a copy of your book. And we'd like to compare it to any letters from fans you might've received."

There was a long pause. Finally the author whispered, "So he did use my book as a model."

"I'm afraid he did, Mr. Carter."

Altman heard nothing for a moment, then a cryptic noise—maybe a sigh. Or maybe the man was crying softly.

"Sir, are you all right?"

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The author cleared his throat. "I'm sorry. I can't help you. I just . . . it'd be too much for me."

Altman often told young officers under him that a detective's most important trait is persistence. He said in an even voice, "You're the only one who can help us trace the book back to him. He destroyed the library computer so we don't have the names of who checked your book out. There's no match on the fingerprints, either. . . . I want to catch this man real bad. And I suspect you do, too, Mr. Carter. Don't you, now?"

There was no response. Finally the faint voice continued, "Do you know that strangers sent me clippings about the killings? Perfect strangers. Hundreds of them. They blamed me. They called my book a 'blueprint for murder.' I had to go into the hospital for a month afterwards, I was so depressed. . . . I caused those murders! Don't you understand that?"

Altman looked up at Wallace and shook his head.

The reporter gestured for the phone. Altman figured, why not?

"Mr. Carter, there's a person here I'm going to put on the line. I'd like him to have a word with you."

"Who?"

He handed the receiver over and sat back, listening to the one-sided conversation.

"Hello, Mr. Carter." The reporter's gaunt frame hunched over the phone and he gripped the receiver in astonishingly long, strong fingers. "You don't know me. My name is Gordon Wallace. I'm a fan of your book—I loved it. I'm the one who found the circled passages. . . . No, I'm not with them; I'm a reporter for the *Tribune* here in Greenville. . . . I got that. I understand that. My colleagues step over a lot of lines. But I don't operate that way. And I know you're reluctant to get involved here. I'm sure you've been through a tough time.

"But I just want to say one thing: I'm no great novelist like you—I'm just a hack journalist—but I am a writer and if I have any important belief in my life it's in the freedom to write whatever moves us. Now . . . No, please, Mr. Carter, let me finish. I heard that you basically stopped writing after the murders. . . . Well, you and your talent were as much a victim of those crimes as those women were. You exercised your God-given right to express yourself and a terrible accident happened. That's how I'd look at this madman: an act of God. A couple of people got killed and you were injured because of that. You can't do anything about those women. But you can help yourself and your family to move on. And there's something else to consider: You're in a position to make sure nobody else ever gets hurt by this guy again."

Altman lifted an impressed eyebrow at the moving sales pitch. Wallace fell silent and, glancing at the detective, shrugged. He held the receiver to his ear for a moment, listening. Finally he

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nodded and glanced at Altman. "He wants to talk to you."

Altman took the phone. "Yessir?"

"What exactly would you want me to do?" came the tentative voice through the phone.

"All I need is for you to look through your fan mail. See if you can find anything suspicious. Any fans who might've written something about these passages in the book." He told Carter which ones had been circled and then added, "And look for any letters from people who asked about how you researched the murders. Particularly from people within, say, a hundred miles or so of Greenville."

Carter protested, "I've got thousands of letters. It'd take a couple of days to go through them all."

"That's fine. We'll follow up on other leads as best we can. . . . But I have one more request, sir."

"What's that?"

"Can we get those letters in person?"

"You want me to come to Greenville?"

"Yessir, I do."

Silence.

The detective persisted. "Depending on what we find, it could be real helpful to have you here. The city'll pay for the mileage and a room if you stay overnight."

"Sir," Carter said slowly, "there's not enough money in the universe to get me to come to Greenville." Altman took a breath to set out his argument, though before he could speak the man continued, "but I'll come anyway."

Altman started to tell the author how much he appreciated the help, but after a moment he realized that the man had hung up and he was listening to dead air.

Andy Clark turned out not to resemble either a sinister artist or a glitzy celebrity but rather any one of the hundreds of white, middle-aged businessmen that populated this region of the Northeast. Thick, graying hair, neatly trimmed. A slight paunch (much slighter than Altman's own, thanks to the cop's fondness for his wife's casseroles). His outfit wasn't an arm-patch sports jacket or any other authorial garb, but an L.L. Bean windbreaker, polo shirt, and corduroy slacks.

It had been two days since Altman had spoken to Carter. The man now stood uneasily in the detective's office, taking the coffee that Josh Randall offered and nodding greetings to the cops and to Gordon Wallace. He slipped off his windbreaker, tossing it on an unoccupied chair. The man's only moment of consternation in this initial meeting was when he glanced at the top of Altman's desk and blinked as he saw the case file that was headed, *Banning, Kimberly—Homicide #13-01.* A brief look of dismay filled his face.

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Altman was grateful that he'd had the foresight to slip the crime-scene photos of the victim's body to the bottom of the folder.

They made small talk for a minute or two and then Altman nodded at a large white envelope in the author's hand. "You find something helpful?"

"Helpful?" Carter asked, rubbing his red eyes. "I don't know. You'll have to decide that." He handed the envelope to the detective. "Oh, I wore gloves when I handled them. Not fancy ones like yours. Playtex. My wife's from the kitchen."

"Good thinking." Altman opened the envelope and, donning his own gloves, pulled out what must've been about fifty or so sheets.

"I looked through the e-mails from fans, too," Carter said. "But I didn't find anything that seemed suspicious."

E-mails wouldn't help them anyway; Altman was after a handwriting comparison.

"The ones on top," Carter continued, nodding at the correspondence, "seemed to be from the most . . . how do I put it? . . . the most intense fans."

The detective led the men into the department conference room and spread the letters out on the table. Randall joined them.

Some of them were typed or printed out from a computer, some were written in cursive, some in block letters. They were on many different types and sizes of paper and in many colors of ink or pencil. Crayons, too.

For half an hour they looked over the letters. Altman finally divided them into two piles. One, he explained, was of letters from fans who were, as Carter had said, "intense." These notes were eerie, nonsensical, angry, or disturbingly personal ("Come to see us in Sioux City if your in town and the wife and me will treat you to our special full body massege out side on the deck behind our trailer.")

"Ick," said Josh Randall.

Yep, definitely icky, Altman thought, but he set that pile aside and explained that they were the discards. "Those're your typical wackos and I don't think they're half dangerous. It's the other ones I'm worried about." He nodded at the second pile. "They're reasonable and calm and cautious . . . just like the strangler. See, he's an organized offender. Calculating and smart. He's not going to give anything away by ranting. If he has any questions, he's going to ask them politely and carefully—he'll want some detail but not too much; that'd arouse suspicion."

Altman gathered up this stack—about ten letters—placed them in an evidence envelope, and handed them to the young detective. "Over to the county lab, stat."

A man stuck his head in the door. Bob Fletcher. The even-keeled sergeant introduced himself to Carter. "We never met, but I spoke to you on the phone last year about the case."

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"I remember." They shook hands.

Fletcher nodded at Altman, smiling ruefully. "He's a better cop than me. I never thought that the killer might've tried to write you."

The sergeant, it turned out, had contacted Carter not about fan mail but to ask if the author had based the story on any previous true crimes, thinking there might be a connection between them and the strangler murders. It had been a good thought, but Carter had explained that the plot for *Two Deaths* was a product of his imagination.

The sergeant's eyes took in the stack of letters. "Any luck?" he asked.

"We'll have to see what the lab finds." Altman then nodded toward the author. "But I have to say that Mr. Carter here's been a huge help. We'd be stymied for sure, it wasn't for him."

Appraising Carter carefully, Fletcher said, "I have to admit I never got a chance to read your book, but I always wanted to meet you. An honest-to-God famous author. Don't think I've ever shook one's hand before."

Carter gave an embarrassed laugh. "Not very famous, to look at my sales figures."

"Well, all I know is my girlfriend read your book and she said it was the best thriller she'd read in years."

Carter said, "I appreciate that. Is she around town? I could autograph her copy."

"Oh," Fletcher said. "Well, we're not going out anymore. She left the area. But thanks for the offer." He headed back to Robbery.

There was now nothing to do but wait for the lab results to come back, so Wallace suggested coffee at Starbucks. The men wandered down the street, ordered, and sat sipping the drinks as Wallace pumped Carter for information about breaking into fiction writing, and Altman simply enjoyed the feel of the hot sun on his face.

The men's recess ended abruptly, though, fifteen minutes later when Altman's phone rang.

"Detective," came the enthusiastic voice of his youthful assistant, "we've got a match! The handwriting in one of Mr. Carter's fan letters matches the notes in the book. The ink's the same, too; there were markers in it."

The detective said, "Please tell me there's a name and address on the letter."

"You bet there is. Howard Desmond's his name. And his place is over in Warwick." A small town fifteen minutes from the sites of both of the Greenville Strangler's attacks.

The detective told his assistant to pull together as much information on Desmond as he could. He snapped the phone shut and, grinning, announced, "We've found him. We've got our copycat."

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But, as it turned out, they didn't have him at all.

Single, forty-two-year-old Howard Desmond, a veterinary technician, had skipped town six months before, leaving in a huge hurry. One day in April he'd called his landlord and announced that he was moving. He'd left virtually overnight, abandoning everything in the apartment but his valuables. There was no forwarding address. Altman had hoped to go through whatever he'd left behind, but the landlord explained that he'd sold everything to make up for the lost rent. What didn't sell, he'd thrown out.

Altman spoke to the vet in whose clinic Desmond had worked, and the doctor's report was similar to the landlord's. In April, Desmond had called and quit his job, effective immediately, saying only that he was moving to Oregon to take care of his elderly grandmother. He never called back with a forwarding address for his last check, as he said he would.

The vet described Desmond as quiet, and affectionate to the animals in his care, but with little patience for people.

Altman contacted the authorities in Oregon and found no record of any Howard Desmond in the DMV files or on the property or income-tax rolls. A bit more digging revealed that all of Desmond's grandparents—his parents, too—had died years before; the story about the move to Oregon was apparently a complete lie.

The few relatives the detective could track down confirmed that he'd just disappeared, and they didn't know where he might be. They echoed his boss's assessment, describing the man as intelligent but a recluse, one who—significantly—loved to read and often lost himself in novels, appropriately for a killer who took his homicidal inspiration from a book.

"What'd his letter to Andy say?" Wallace asked.

With an okaying nod from Altman, Randall handed it to the reporter, who then summarized out loud. "He asks how Mr. Carter did the research for his book. What were the sources he used? How did he learn about the most efficient way a murderer would kill someone? And he's curious about the mental makeup of a killer. Why did some people find it easy to kill while others couldn't possibly hurt anyone?"

Altman shook his head. "No clue as to where he might've gone. We'll get his name into NCIC and ViCAP but, hell, he could be anywhere. South America, Europe, Singapore . . ."

Since Bob Fletcher's Robbery division would've handled the vandalism at the Greenville library's Three Pines branch, which they now knew Desmond was responsible for, Altman sent Randall to ask the sergeant if he'd found any leads that would be helpful.

The other men found themselves staring at Desmond's fan letter as if it were a corpse at a wake, silence surrounding them, trying to guess where the killer might've gone.

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Altman glanced up and noticed that Andy Carter was frowning as he gazed at a large map of Greenville County up on the wall. The author nodded to himself slowly and then said, "Had a thought."

"Go on."

"Desmond rented his place, right?"

"Yep."

"Well, he had a decent job, he wasn't a youngster, and he was single. He had to've had some money. Why would he rent? Houses aren't that expensive in Greenville."

Altman shrugged. "I don't know. What do you make of that?"

"My wife and I used to go up to the Adirondacks in the summer. We looked into buying a place awhile ago but we couldn't afford to own two houses. So we ended up renting."

The detective nodded. "So you're thinking that one reason a man would rent his main residence was if he owned a house somewhere else. A summer house or something."

"Just a thought."

"But you checked the county registrar; he didn't own any property," Wallace pointed out to Altman.

"But we didn't check other counties," the detective replied. "A vacation place might not be nearby." He grabbed his phone.

And in less than five minutes they had their answer.

Howard Desmond did indeed own a house elsewhere—on the shore of Lake Muskegon, sixty miles from Greenville, tucked away into the backwater, piney wilderness.

"Good thought," the detective said to Carter. "Thanks."

"You think he's hiding out there?" Wallace asked.

"Doubt it," Altman said. "He's not stupid. I were him, I'd vanish for a couple of years, till everybody'd forgotten about the case and I thought it was safe to come back to the area. But there could be some leads there to where he did go. Maybe airline receipts or something."

Josh Randall returned to report that Sergeant Bob Fletcher had no helpful information in the library vandalism case.

But Altman said, "Doesn't matter. We've got a better lead. Suit up, Josh."

"What're we doing?"

"We're going for a ride in the country. What else on a nice fall day like this?"

Lake Muskegon is a large but shallow body of water bordered by willow, tall grass, and ugly pine. Altman didn't know the place well. He'd brought his family here for a couple of picnics over the years, and he and Bob Fletcher had come to the lake once on a halfhearted fishing expedition, of which Altman had only vague memories: gray, drizzly weather and a nearly empty creel at the end of the day.

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As he and Randall drove north through the increasingly deserted landscape he briefed the young man. "Now, I'm ninety-nine percent sure Desmond's not here. But what we're going to do first is clear the house—I mean closet by closet—and then I want you stationed in the front to keep an eye out while I look for evidence. Okay?"

"Sure, boss."

They passed Desmond's overgrown driveway and pulled off the road, then eased into a stand of thick forsythia.

Together, the men cautiously made their way down the weedy drive toward the "vacation house," a dignified term for the tiny, shabby cottage sitting in a three-foot-high sea of grass and brush. A path had been beaten through the foliage—somebody had been here recently—but it might not have been Desmond; Altman had been a teenager once himself and knew that nothing attracts adolescent attention like a deserted house.

They drew their weapons and Altman pounded on the door, calling, "Police. Open up."

Silence.

He hesitated a moment, adjusted the grip on his gun, and kicked the door in.

Filled with cheap, dust-covered furniture, buzzing with stuporous fall flies, the place appeared completely deserted. They checked the four small rooms carefully and found no sign of Desmond. Outside, they glanced in the window of the garage and saw that it was empty. Then Altman sent Randall to the front of the driveway to hide in the bushes and report anybody's approach.

He then returned to the house and began to search, wondering just how hot the cold case was about to become.

Two hundred yards before the driveway that led to Howard Desmond's cottage, a battered, ten-year-old Toyota pulled onto the shoulder of Route 207 and then into the woods, out of sight of any drivers along the road.

A man got out and, satisfied that his car was well hidden, squinted into the forest, getting his bearings. He noticed the line of the brown lake to his left and figured the vacation house was in the ten-o'clock position ahead of him. Through dense underbrush like this, it would take him about fifteen minutes to get to the place, he estimated.

That'd make the time pretty tight. He'd have to move as quickly as he could and still keep the noise to a minimum.

The man started forward, but then stopped suddenly and patted his pocket. He'd been in such a hurry to get to the house he couldn't remember if he'd taken what he wanted from the glove compartment. But yes, he had it with him.

Hunched over and picking his way carefully to avoid stepping on

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noisy branches, Gordon Wallace continued on toward the cabin where, he hoped, Detective Altman was lost in police work and would be utterly oblivious to his furtive approach.

The search of the house revealed virtually nothing that would indicate that Desmond had been here recently—or where the man might now be. Altman found some bills and canceled checks, but the address on them was Desmond's apartment in Warwick.

He decided to check the garage, thinking he might come across something helpful that the killer had tossed out of the car and forgotten about—directions or a map, maybe.

He found something far more interesting in the decrepit building, though. Howard Desmond himself.

That is to say, his corpse.

The moment Altman opened the old-fashioned double doors of the garage he detected the smell of decaying flesh. He knew where it had to be coming from: a large coal bin in the back. Steeling himself, he flipped up the lid.

Inside were the mostly skeletal remains of a man about six feet tall, lying on his back, fully clothed. He'd been dead about six months—just around the time Desmond disappeared, Altman recalled.

DNA would tell for certain if this was the killer, but Altman discovered the man's wallet in his hip pocket and, sure enough, the driver's license inside was Desmond's. There wasn't enough face left to be sure, but the thatch of hair on the corpse's skull and the man's height were the same as indicated on the license.

He looked briefly through the bin again and found nothing else that would identify the body or who'd killed him, though he did find the apparent murder weapon—a stained, old-fashioned military bayonet. Lifting it out with a Kleenex, he set the weapon on a workbench.

So what the hell was going on?

Somebody had murdered the strangler. Who? And why?

But then Altman did one of the things he did best—let his mind run free. Too many detectives get an idea into their heads and can't see past their initial conclusions. Altman, though, always fought against this tendency and he now asked himself: But what if Desmond wasn't the strangler?

They knew for certain that he was the one who'd underlined the passages in the library's copy of *Two Deaths in a Small Town.* But what if he'd done so after the killings? The letter Desmond had written to Carter was undated. Maybe—like Gordon Wallace—he'd read the book after the murders and been struck by the similarity. He'd started to investigate the crime himself and the strangler had found out and murdered him.

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But then who was the killer?

Like Gordon Wallace . . .

Altman felt another little tap in his far-ranging mind, as fragments of facts lined up for him to consider—facts that all had to do with the reporter. For instance, Wallace was physically imposing, abrasive, temperamental. At times he could be threatening, scary. He was obsessed with crime, and he knew police and forensic procedures better than most cops, which also meant that he knew how to anticipate investigators' moves. (He'd sure blustered his way right into the middle of the reopened case just the other day, Altman reflected.) Wallace owned a Motorola police scanner and would've been able to listen in on calls about the victims. His apartment was a few blocks from the college where the first victim was killed.

The detective considered: Let's say that Desmond had read the passages, become suspicious, and circled them, then made a few phone calls to find out more about the case. He might've called Wallace, who, as the *Tribune*'s crime reporter, would be a logical source for more information.

Desmond had met with the reporter, who'd then killed him and hid the body here.

Impossible. . . .

Why would he have brought the book to the police's attention, then? And why would he have killed the two women in the first place? What was his motive?

But Altman refused to dismiss the notion of Wallace's involvement so quickly. He bent down into the shabby, impromptu crypt again to search it more carefully, trying to unearth answers to those difficult questions.

Gordon Wallace caught a glimpse of Altman in the garage.

The reporter had crept up to a spot only thirty feet away and was hiding behind a bush. The detective wasn't paying any attention to who might be outside, apparently relying on Josh Randall to alert him to intruders. The young detective was at the head of the driveway, a good two hundred feet away, his back to the garage.

Breathing heavily in the heat, the reporter started through the grass in a crouch. He stopped beside the building and glanced quickly into the side window, noting that Altman was standing over a coal bin in the rear of the garage, squinting at something in his hand.

Perfect, Wallace thought, and, reaching into his pocket, eased to the open doorway, where his aim would be completely unobstructed.

The detective had found some papers in Desmond's pocket and was staring at one in particular, a business card, trying to figure it out, when he heard the snap of a twig behind him and, alarmed, turned.

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A silhouette of a figure was standing in the doorway. He seemed to be holding his hands at chest level.

Blinded by the glare, Altman gasped, "Who're—?"

A huge flash filled the room.

The detective stumbled backward, groping for his pistol.

"Damn," came a voice he recognized.

Altman squinted against the backlighting. "Wallace! You goddamn son of a bitch. What the hell're you doing here?"

The reporter scowled and held up the camera in his hand, looking just as unhappy as Altman. "I was trying to get a candid of you on the job, but you turned around. You ruined it."

"I ruined it? You've got no business being here. I told you not to get in the way. You can't—"

"I'm not in the way," the man snapped. "I'm nowhere near you. How can I be in the way?"

"This's a crime scene."

"Well, that's why I want the pictures," he said petulantly. Then he frowned. "What's that smell?" The camera sagged and the reporter started to breathe in shallow gasps. He looked queasy.

"It's Desmond. Somebody murdered him. He's in the coal bin."

"Murdered him? So he's not the killer?"

Altman lifted his radio and barked to Randall, "We've got visitors back here."

"What?"

"We're in the garage."

The young officer showed up a moment later, trotting fast. A disdainful look at Wallace. "Where the hell did you come from?"

"How'd you let him get past?" Altman snapped.

"Not his fault," the reporter said, shivering at the smell. "I parked up the road. How 'bout we get some fresh air?"

Angry, Altman took perverse pleasure in the reporter's discomfort. "I oughta throw you in jail."

Wallace held his breath and started for the coal bin, raising the camera.

"Don't even think about it," Altman growled, and pulled the reporter away.

"Who did it?" Randall asked, nodding at the body.

Altman didn't share that for a moment he'd actually suspected Wallace himself. Just before the photo-op incident he'd found a stunning clue as to who Desmond's—and the two women's—killer actually was. He held up a business card. "I found this on the body."

On the card was written, "Detective Sergeant Robert Fletcher, Greenville Police Department."

"Bob?" Randall whispered in shock.

"I don't want to believe it," Altman muttered slowly, "but back at the office he didn't let on he even knew about Desmond, let alone

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that they'd met at some point."

"True, he didn't say a word."

"And," he continued, nodding at the bayonet, "doesn't that look like one of his?"

"Does, yeah," Randall said.

Bob Fletcher collected World War II memorabilia and weapons. The wicked-looking blade was similar to several in his collection.

Altman's heart pounded furiously at the betrayal. He now understood what had happened. Fletcher bobbled the case intentionally—because he was the killer—probably destroying any evidence that led to him. A loner, a history of short, difficult relationships, obsessed with the military and hunting. . . . He'd lied to them about not reading *Two Deaths* and had used it as a model to kill those women. Then—after the killings—Desmond happened to read the book, too, underlined the passages, and, being a good citizen, contacted case officer Fletcher, who was none other than the killer himself. The sergeant murdered him, dumped the body here, and then destroyed the library's computer and never made any effort to pursue the vandalism investigation.

Altman then had another thought. He turned suddenly to the reporter. "Where was Fletcher when you left the office? Did you see him at the station?" The detective's hand strayed to his pistol as he looked around the tall grass, wondering if the sergeant now intended to kill them as well.

"He was in the conference room with Andy Carter."

No! Altman realized that they weren't the only ones at risk; the author was a witness, too—and a potential victim of Fletcher's. Altman grabbed his cell phone and called the central dispatcher. He asked for Carter.

"He's not here, sir," the woman said.

"What?"

"It was getting late so he decided to get a hotel room for the night."

"Which one's he staying at?"

"I think it's the Sutton Inn."

"You have the number?"

"I do, sure. But he's not there right now."

"Where is he?"

"He went out to dinner. I don't know where, but if you need to get in touch with him you can call Bob Fletcher's phone. They were going together."

Twenty minutes from town, driving at ninety.

Altman tried again to call Fletcher but the sergeant wasn't answering. There wasn't much Altman could do except try to reason with the sergeant, have him give himself up, plead with him not to kill Carter, too. He prayed that the cop hadn't already done so.

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Another try. Still no answer.

He skidded the squad car through the intersection at Route 202, nearly sideswiping one of the ubiquitous dairy tankers in these parts.

"Okay, that was exciting," Randall whispered, removing his sweaty palm from the dashboard as the truck's horn brayed in angry protest behind them.

Altman was about to call Fletcher's phone again when a voice clattered over the car's radio. "All units. Reports of shots fired on Route One-twenty-eight just west of Ralph's Grocery. Repeat, shots fired. All units respond."

"You think that's them?"

"We're three minutes away. We're about to find out." Altman pushed the accelerator to the floor and they broke into three-digit speed.

After a brief, harrowing ride, the squad car crested a hill. Randall called breathlessly, "Look!"

Altman could see Bob Fletcher's police interceptor half on, half off the road. He skidded to a stop nearby and the two officers jumped out. Wallace's car—which had been hitching an illegal ride on their light bar and siren—braked to a stop fifty feet behind them and the reporter, too, jumped out, ignoring the detective's shout to stay down.

Altman felt Randall grip his arm. The young officer was pointing at the shoulder about fifty feet away. In the dim light, they could just make out the form of Andrew Carter lying facedown in the dust.

Oh no! They weren't in time; the sergeant had added the author to the list of his victims.

"Look out for Fletcher," he whispered to a spooked Josh Randall. "He's around here someplace and we know he's armed."

Altman ran toward the author's body. As he did, he happened to glance to his left and gasped. There was Bob Fletcher on the ground, holding a shotgun.

He shouted to Randall, "Look out!" and dropped flat. But as he swung the gun toward Fletcher he noted that the sergeant wasn't moving. The detective hit the man with his flashlight beam. Fletcher's eyes were glazed over and there were two bullet holes in his chest.

Wallace was crouching over Carter. The reporter called, "He's alive!"

The detective rose, pulled the scattergun out of Fletcher's lifeless hands, and trotted over to the author. The man's face was bloody and streaked with dirt, his clothes torn. Lying on the ground nearby was a black revolver, the sort that Fletcher had carried.

"Are you shot?"

Carter winced and blinked.

"Andy? Are you shot?"

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In response, the author shook his head. "No. But I think I broke my arm. I can't feel anything in my fingers."

"There's an ambulance on its way. Just stay where you are. Don't try to get up."

"My leg . . . man, it hurts."

"Just stay still, Andy. Don't move. . . . Tell me what happened."

Gasping, Carter said, "Fletcher said let's go to dinner. We took his car. He said if I didn't mind he had to make a stop on the way to the restaurant and he turned down this road. Then he was talking and he said it was funny, this road reminded him of that scene in my book where the hunter's waiting for one of the victims."

"Ah."

"Right," Carter continued. "He said he hadn't read it. He lied to us. That meant he had to be the strangler. And he was taking me someplace to kill me." Carter coughed and laid his head back on the ground. A moment later he continued, "When he slowed down to turn into that side road I grabbed his pistol and jumped out of the car. I thought I could run into the forest and hide. But I hurt myself landing and couldn't get up. Fletcher stopped and got the shotgun out of the trunk. He came after me and I fired a couple of times and then passed out. . . ." He looked at the body up the road. He whispered, "I didn't want to kill him. I didn't have any choice."

Over a crest in the road Altman could see flashing lights and hear sirens, growing steadily louder. As Randall ran toward them, gesturing wildly, Altman collected the weapons. He glanced at Bob Fletcher's body. Murdering Howard Desmond and trying to murder Andy Carter—well, those had been to cover up his original crimes. But what had been the sergeant's motive for killing the two women in Greenville last year? Maybe the anger at being left by his wife had boiled over. Maybe he'd had a secret affair with one of the victims, which had turned sour, and he'd decided to stage her death as a random act of violence.

And maybe, Altman reflected, unlike in a mystery novel, they'd never know what had driven the man to step over the edge into the dark world of the killers he'd once hunted.

The doctors kept Andrew Carter in the hospital overnight, though it seemed that the flying leap from the car—as dramatic and frightening as it probably seemed to him—hadn't caused any serious damage.

The next morning he checked out of Greenville Memorial and stopped by the police department to say goodbye to Altman and Randall and to sign a formal statement about the events of the previous night.

"Got the latest from Forensics," Altman said, and explained that Fletcher's prints were all over the bayonet and that a search of the

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sergeant's house revealed several items—stockings and lingerie—that had been taken from the homes of the victims, leaving no doubt that Fletcher was the Greenville Strangler. Most people in town, certainly everyone in the police department, were shocked at this news. But Quentin Altman had to admit that one of the things he'd learned in his twenty-plus years of being a cop was that you never really knew what was in anybody's heart but your own.

He chatted with the author for a few moments but their conversation quickly became merely the superficial exchange between two men whose sole reason for contact no longer existed, and Carter finally looked at his watch, saying that he'd better be going. Altman walked him outside.

They were leaving the police station when Gordon Wallace loped up to them. "Hot off the presses." He handed a copy of the *Tribune* to Carter. On the front page was Wallace's story about the solving of the Greenville Strangler case.

"Keep that," Wallace said. "A souvenir."

Thanking him, Carter folded the paper up, slipped it under his arm, and walked to his car.

Altman observed that the author seemed in somewhat better spirits than when he'd arrived. The melancholy remained in his eyes, but the detective sensed that he'd found a bit of inner peace by coming to Greenville, to the site of the terrible killings that he felt responsible for. And perhaps making this difficult trip and risking his own life to help bring the killer to justice would ultimately prove to be a godsend; unlike many people touched by tragedy, Carter had had the rare chance to revisit the past and personally confront the demons of guilt that threatened to destroy his life.

Just before the man climbed into his Toyota, Altman called out, "Oh, one thing, Andy—how's that book of yours end? Do the police ever find the hunter?"

Carter caught himself as he was about to answer. He gave a grin. "You know, Detective, if you want to find that out, I'm afraid you're just going to have to buy yourself a copy." He dropped into the front seat, fired the car up, and pulled into the street, offering a brief wave goodbye.

At two A.M. the next morning Andrew Carter slipped out of bed, where he'd lain wide-awake for the past three hours.

He glanced at the quiescent form of his sleeping wife and went to his closet, where he found and pulled on an old pair of faded jeans, sneakers, and a Boston University sweatshirt—his good-luck writing clothes, which he hadn't donned in well over a year.

He walked down the hall to his office and went inside, turning on the light. Sitting at his desk, he clicked on his computer and stared at the screen for a long moment.

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Then suddenly he began to write. His keyboarding was clumsy at first, his fingers jabbing two keys at once or missing the intended one altogether. Still, as the hours passed, his skill as a typist returned and soon the words were pouring from his mind onto the screen flawlessly and fast.

By the time the sky began to glow with pink-gray light and a bird's cell-phone trill sounded from the crisp holly bush outside his window, he'd finished the story completely—thirty-nine double-spaced pages.

He moved the cursor to the top of the document, thought about an appropriate title, and typed: *Copycat.*

Then Andy Carter sat back in his comfortable chair and carefully read his work from start to finish.

The story opened with a reporter finding a suspense novel that contained several underlined passages, which were strikingly similar to two real-life murders that had occurred a year earlier. The reporter takes the book to a detective, who concludes that the man who circled the paragraphs is the perpetrator, a copycat inspired by the novel to kill.

Reviving the case, the detective enlists the aid of the novel's author, who reluctantly agrees to help and brings the police some fan letters, one of which leads to the suspected killer.

But when the police track the suspect to his summer home, they find that he's been murdered. He wasn't the killer at all, and had presumably circled the passages only because he, too, like the reporter, was struck by the similarity between the novel and the real-life crimes.

Then the detective gets a big shock: on the fan's body he finds clues that prove that a sergeant on the town police force is the real killer. The author, who happens to be with this very officer at that moment, manages to wrestle the sergeant's gun away and shoot him in self-defense.

Case closed.

Or so it seems. . . .

But Andy Carter hadn't ended the story there. He added yet another twist. Readers learn at the very end that the sergeant was innocent. The real strangler had set him up as a fall guy.

And who was the strangler?

None other than the author himself.

Racked by writer's block after his first novel was published, unable to follow it up with another, the man had descended into madness. Desperate and demented, he came to believe that he might jump-start his writing by actually reenacting scenes from his novel, so he stalked and strangled two women, just as his fictional villain had done.

The murders hadn't revived his ability to write, however, and he

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slumped further into depression. And then, even more troubling, he heard from the fan who'd grown suspicious about the similarities between certain passages in the novel and the real crimes. The author had no choice: He met with the fan and killed him, too, hiding the body in the man's lakeside summer cottage. He covered up the disappearance by pretending to be the fan and phoning the man's boss and landlord to say that he was leaving town unexpectedly.

The author now believed he was safe. But his contentment didn't last. Enter the reporter who'd found the underlined passages, and the investigation started anew. When he was asked to help the police, the author knew he had to give them a scapegoat. So he agreed to meet with the police, but in fact he'd arrived in town a day early. He broke into the police sergeant's house, planted some incriminating evidence from the first murders, and stole one of the cop's bayonets and his business card. These he planted on the body of the fan at the lake house. The next day he showed up at the police station with the fan letter that led ultimately to the cottage, where the detective found the leads to the sergeant. Meanwhile, the author, alone with the unsuspecting cop, grabbed his gun and shot him, later claiming self-defense.

In the final scene, the author returned home to try to resume his writing, having literally gotten away with murder.

Carter now finished reading the story, his heart thumping hard with pride and excitement. True, it needed polishing, but considering that he hadn't written a word for more than a year, it was a glorious accomplishment. He was a writer once again.

The only problem was that he couldn't publish the story. He couldn't show it to a living soul, not even his wife. For the simple reason that it wasn't fiction; every word was true. Andy Carter himself was the homicidal author.

Still, he thought, as he erased the entire story from his computer, publishing it didn't matter one bit. The important thing was that by writing it he'd managed to kill his writer's block as ruthlessly and efficiently as he'd murdered Bob Fletcher and Howard Desmond and the two women in Greenville. And he knew, too, how to make sure that the block never rose from the dead. From now on he'd give up fiction and pursue what he'd realized he was destined to write: true crime.

What a perfect solution this was! He'd never want for ideas again; TV news, magazines, and the papers would provide dozens of story leads he could choose from.

And, he reflected, walking downstairs to make a pot of coffee, if it turned out that there were no crimes that particularly interested him . . . well, Andy Carter knew that he was fully capable of taking matters into his own hands and whipping up a bit of inspiration all by himself. ●

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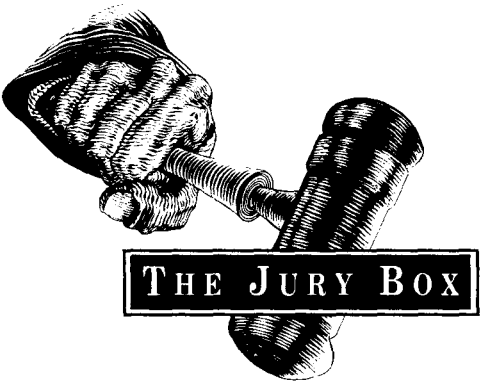

by Jon L. Breen

New Yorker Stanley Hastings is a lucky man. True, among first-person fictional private eyes, he aligns himself with the self-deprecating sad-sack nebbish school, and his usual work is interviewing potential clients for a borderline-sleazy personal injury lawyer. But on the plus side, he has one of mystery fiction's best marriages; he manages to stumble into some of the most deftly plotted classical murder puzzles in the current market; and when the going gets tough, he can manipulate his way out of trouble as expertly as Perry Mason, Donald Lam, or any other Erle Stanley Gardner hero. In each of the recent Hastings novels, author Parnell Hall pays tribute to a different mystery subgenre. In the latest, you won't be sure which one is the object of his homage until near the end.

**** Parnell Hall: *Manslaughter,* Carroll & Graf/Penzler, $25. Asked to put a red rose in his lapel and impersonate a client to meet a presumed blackmailer in a singles bar, Stanley gets long-suffering police contact MacAullif to appear in his place, only the first tricky reversal in a dazzlingly complex and laugh-out-loud funny narrative. Hall has so much fun with a current communications plague, the one-word title could easily have been *Cellphone.*

**** Jill Paton Walsh and Dorothy L. Sayers: *A Presumption of Death,* St. Martin's Minotaur, $25.95. In early 1940, with Lord Peter Wimsey on a dangerous secret mission for the wartime British government, wife Harriet Vane at first goes it alone on the home front, asked by the Paggleham village police to look into the murder of a Land Girl during a blackout. As in her completion of the unfinished Wimsey novel *Thrones, Dominations* (1998), Walsh does a remarkable job of duplicating Sayers's characters and milieu. The dual byline is

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justified this time by the use of selections from Sayers's non-criminous Wimsey family letters, written for the *Spectator* in 1939-40, to begin the novel and as source material throughout. The grasp of period detail is so sure, it's a shame one sore-thumb anachronism (a reference to a "bachelor pad"!) was allowed to sneak through.

*** Joyce Krieg: *Murder Off Mike,* St. Martin's Minotaur, $23.95. Fans of talk radio will especially enjoy an insider's view of that medium in the winner of the publisher's Malice Domestic Contest for Best First Traditional Mystery. Sacramento talk host Shauna J. Bogart is a funny and likable first-person narrator; the complex plot is decently worked out; and the background of the radio, musical, and political scene of the California capital is vividly realized.

*** Ray Bradbury: *Let's All Kill Constance,* Morrow, $23.95. This is the third novel (and first since 1990) about an unnamed narrator, author of pulp science fiction and movie scripts, whom you might as well call Bradbury. In 1960, our hero is spurred into action by a worried actress who fears the sudden appearance of a 1900 L.A. telephone book and one of her old address books (books of the dead) represents a death threat. The speech of the outsized characters is as colorful and quirky as the dream-like narrative, which is spiced with old Hollywood references, as much alcohol consumption as a 'forties whodunit, and the nostalgia that resonates in so much of Bradbury's fiction. While this is not the conventional detective story it occasionally almost resembles, it is not quite an anti-detective story, either. Bradbury has been writing mysteries, with stories dating back to early 1940s pulp magazines, as long as science fiction. But both his mystery and s.f. readers must bear in mind that he is at heart a poet and a fantasist.

*** Gary Soto: *Amnesia in a Republican County,* University of New Mexico Press, $23.95. Radical Chicano poet Silver Mendez comes to after a blow from a falling typewriter to find himself a sabbatical replacement at a conservative Baptist college in Simi Valley, California. The third Mendez novel from poet and memoirist Soto has some crime and mystery trappings—the sure-fire amnesia angle, hints of campus drug trade, threats of mysterious origin, menacing crooks and cops, violence and bloodshed (both real and metaphorical)—but it's essentially a free-wheeling satire on contemporary politics, religion, ethnicity, social class, and cultural icons, with enough self-delusion and hypocrisy on all sides for wide-ranging authorial scorn.

*** Ed Gorman: *Everybody's Somebody's Fool,* Carroll & Graf, $24. The fifth about Black River Falls, Iowa, lawyer Sam McCain takes us to the summer

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of 1961 and a plot involving drag racing. Gorman walks the line between honest nostalgia and grim reality in a series marked by humor, a bittersweet worldview, and exasperating characters who become endearing because of the sympathetic way they are viewed. (While the novel shares some features with the March 2002 *EQMM* short story "Heartbreaker," it is finally quite different.)

*** Ed Gorman: *Relentless,* Berkley, $5.99. In his other role as a Spur Award-winning Western writer, Gorman displays the same nimble plotting skill, grasp of period detail, and deep human empathy that are found in the McCain novels. In the late 19th century, Lane Morgan, town marshal of Skylar, Colorado, confronts a young would-be gunfighter's challenge, pressure from the rich man who runs the town, secrets in his schoolteacher wife's past, and a multi-suspect whodunit that makes this gripping novel as much mystery as Western.

*** Suzann Ledbetter: *A Lady Never Trifles With Thieves,* Pocket Books, $5.99. In another Western/mystery crossover, Denver private eye Joby Sawyer gains clients among the rough-and-ready 1870s frontiersmen by pretending her late father, former U.S. Marshal Joseph Beckworth Sawyer, is still alive and heading the firm. Her almost-romance with a law-enforcement professional and her bantering relationship with protective and super-literate Chinese servant Won Li add to the charm of a highly promising new series. Best news of all: some genuine fair-play clues are included in the working out of a plot involving an abusive marriage and a serial burglar of homes of the wealthy. (Oddly, at least in my advance proof copy, the author seems to use Occidental when she means Oriental.)

Two fine anthologies from Otto Penzler have been reprinted in trade paperback: *The 50 Greatest Mysteries of All Time* (New Millennium, $15.95), a historical treasury from Poe to Elmore Leonard first published in 1998, and *Murderers' Row* (New Millennium, $14), a collection of original baseball mysteries by an all-star cast of contributors, first published in 2001.

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In the 1940s, in response to announcements *EQMM* sent all over the world publicizing its short story contests, submissions came to us, in translation, from France, Germany, Austria, Italy, the Netherlands, Portugal, Mexico, Brazil, Argentina, China, Japan, and the Philippines. As Ellery Queen said in 1948 when he decided to pull together from these submissions a special "United Nations Issue": "The outstanding development of last year's contest was the unexpectedly large number of stories sent in from foreign countries and their memorable range of geographic location. This united effort on the part of detective story writers proved that while we still have a long way to go politically, the planet Earth is truly One World detective-storywise."

Fifty-five years later, circumstances again seem favorable for working toward "One World" for the crime story. This time, however, our role will be proactive. Instead of waiting for the stories to come to us in perfectly translated English, we will be actively seeking authors and translators. We aim to visit a different country each month via a crime or mystery story never before available in English. Our hope is that their appearance in *EQMM* will become an entrée for the stories' authors to wider English-language publication. Though it is likely that a certain number of authors already famous in their own country will be chosen for the series—just as the renowned Jorge Luis Borges was selected as a winner of one of *EQMM*'s early contests—we are not specifically in search of celebrities. Our only criterion for inclusion will be quality—a criterion that should lead to the discovery of relatively unknown authors, too.

When we began this project we knew we'd need help from the gods—specifically, the god of Time. A dozen years ago such a series would not have been feasible, for there was then a dearth of translated material at novel length, only minimal interest among reviewers, and an absence of known professional translators. But time rolls on and interests change. By the spring of 2002 we were beginning to see books by authors such as Mexico's Paco Taibo and China's Qiu Xiaolong in the stores. Was there now sufficient interest and a large enough cadre of first-rate translators to make uniting the world of crime fiction a possibility?

We called on some old friends to answer that question: Mary Frisque and Jeremiah Healy of the International Association of Crime Writers; Austrian Brigitte Scott, translator and afficionado of German-language mysteries; Doug Greene of Crippen & Landru Publishers; world mystery expert Edward D. Hoch; Jiro Kimura, Japan's premier mystery editor and translator; and John Apostolou, fan of Japanese mysteries. Within weeks they'd helped us set the ball rolling. We thank them heartily, but now it's up to you, our readers. We've put aside space in each of the next ten issues (a full calendar year) for our round-the-world experiment. If you enjoy what you read—and perhaps feel as Ellery Queen did, that "This is a step in the right direction—toward international harmony and cooperation, toward good will on Earth. (May the bickering statesmen of the world heed the example set by detective story writers!)"—please write and let us know and we will make Passport to Crime a permanent department.

Bon voyage!

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PASSPORT TO CRIME

VIOLENCE AGAINST A DEFENCELESS WOMAN

by Richard Macker

Translated from the Norwegian by Jorunn and Michael Fergus

Reidar Thomassen, a.k.a. Richard Macker, worked as a teacher and magazine editor before writing his first novel in 1969. The book received a literary prize, and he enjoyed further success in the 1970s when his first crime novel was adapted for a series on Norwegian TV. The author is best known, however, for his crime short stories, which have won numerous awards. Critics consistently cite his psychological insight and ironic style. This is the first time Mr. Macker has been translated into English.

To get there in time he took a tram from Pilestredet. It was rush hour and people were sitting and standing everywhere, and he took up a position at the rear end of the tram facing a window in order to avoid the bothersome looks.

He got off at Valkyrie Square. The sharp October air made him shudder from the cold and he turned up his coat collar, pulled the grey, dented hat a little further over his forehead. As he descended the dirty grey stairway to the subway station he caught a glimpse of himself in the glass of one of the old exhibition stands, the very image of an expressionless face, a tightly shut mouth, a silhouette formed by the broad rim of the hat and the wide black coat. It was as if he had seen a restless shadow of himself there, a dark reflection that only had the contours of a face. Well, yes, he thought and gave a long whistle—that was just how he wanted to look. This was how she would see him.

Down on the platform he took up a position with his back close

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to the wall and waited. Trains came and went, people rushed on and off, flickered past him. The restless steps on the concrete made an intense yet subdued reverberation in the depressing waiting hall. It was nearly five o'clock, and the worst of the rush hour would soon be over. He knew she was a person of habit, that she took the Holmenkollen commuter train at five to five from the National Theatre station every day after work.

He pricked up his ears, heard immediately the faraway, grinding metal sound that announces that a new train is on its way through the tunnel towards the station. He stepped forward a pace and positioned himself precisely in the spot where he had been standing the four previous days. Then he fixed his gaze on the dark tunnel opening.

It came, the train he had been waiting for. She sat where she always sat, almost right at the back of the last carriage, at the window that faced out onto the platform. As usual, she had a newspaper in front of her, but he felt a thrill of joy when he noticed that she was not preoccupied with it—but with him. Her big blue eyes stared directly at him, and there seemed to be some kind of shadow of recognition in them, mixed with amazement. Or was it surprise? *At last she knows me,* he thought. The laughter suddenly started bubbling up in him and he had to struggle to contain himself. The three carriages that made up the train had started moving again, but she turned her head, returning his gaze. And he gazed back, all the while absorbing every second of this short intense meeting between two pairs of eyes. At last, just before the carriage was about to disappear, she made a sudden twist of her head and turned forward again. The last thing he saw of her was her hair. Her blond hair shimmered like gold.

He stood there for several minutes in the same position; there was a small flicker on his pursed lips, a closed and almost imperceptible smile. Then he thrust his head deeper into the turned-up coat collar and started walking towards the stairs. *She looked at me,* he thought. *Looked at me, recognised me.*

For four days he'd been standing there without getting anywhere. The glances she had cast on the platform had been quick and arbitrary , without dwelling on anything. But now! He could hardly believe it, and as he reentered the street, he let out a whistle. He whistled and smiled in turn. Then someone was looking at him, a thin, angular woman with a hard stare and a deep, angry wrinkle between her eyebrows. He wrapped himself up, bared his teeth at her on purpose, felt the delicious feeling of strength as she stiffened and her eyes filled with angst. She made him think of his childhood, of his mother. It was as if someplace deep inside his head he could hear her hoarse, wailing voice: *Willy, ugly little Willy, leave your mother alone, showing your ugly face only makes me sicker.*

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He returned to Pilestredet. The small bed-sitter he rented through his job was part of a large housing block, built sometime in the 'thirties. His apartment was on the ground floor with a window facing a dark backyard. Here he felt safe, concealed, hidden from the crowds of people in the streets outside. Not far away was the large brewery where he performed his hard, monotonous work as a storekeeper. Here were the large, somber halls where he could hide away, eat his sandwiches in peace.

He kept his flat tidy. On his coffee table, magazines and newspapers were stacked in a neat pile.

A multicoloured blanket, carefully folded, was placed in a corner of his worn, grey studio couch. In the window stood a large flowerpot with healthy, well-tended plants. Everything in the tiny flat was uncluttered, tidy. He went into the kitchen area, opened the fridge, and took out a tin of stew. It was opened, he had had half the contents the day before, and he now emptied the rest into a pot that he put on the stove. He'd bought the tin with several others on a special offer at a nearby supermarket. This tin had cost him a pound. Fifty pence for each dinner. In fact, it was more than he could afford, because he had recently used up all of his savings on an expensive purchase. Yes, he had actually had to borrow nine hundred kroner from a colleague at work—one of those who had never really worked very hard, and who had his methods for dodging work, too.

While he was cooking his dinner, he kept thinking about her. Of the blue sparkling eyes, the oval, childishly smooth face, the silky hair the color of ripe corn, and the small, trim figure. He recalled the little cleft between her upper teeth. And that smile! Yes, for once she had smiled at him, one unforgettable time some months earlier, that warm morning when it was still late summer. She had been in front of him in the street, and he did not know about her. She was just one of that great mass of humanity that he sometimes ventured out into. She had dropped her umbrella from her shoulder bag and gone on without noticing. He had picked up the umbrella and run after her, catching her by the shoulder. Surprise showed on her face as she turned round, surprise and a strange shudder of confusion. She had been beautiful, almost sublimely so, and the last thing he wanted to see in her deep blue eyes was revulsion or disgust. Quickly he held up the umbrella to her face. And it was then that she had smiled, as she took the umbrella from him. Smiled at him. Then she thanked him before turning and continuing on her way.

She had been the very revelation, the very princess from all his dreams, and from the fantasies which had pursued him from childhood, from the countless times he had hidden himself away in the corner of his unkempt flat and opened the storybook with the picture of the flaxen-haired princess as she rode so surely on the

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back of a bear through the dark, rain-sodden pine forest. At last he had found the one that he would never ever lose hold of again. Almost in a panic, he began to run up the street and did not lose sight of her before she disappeared into one of those big office complexes in Vika. Then he settled down to wait and wandered around the streets outside for hours. It was a day in his summer holiday, one of those days that he would have spent wandering round to no purpose anyway, not knowing what to do with himself.

At last, at a quarter to five, she emerged from the towering concrete block. Alone. He hid himself in a passageway, stood there, and watched her passing by, so close that he could smell the sweet perfume from her. And then an all-embracing warmth had arisen within him. A little later he had seen her go down the steps to the underground station at the National Theatre. He followed after her and noted which subway line she took and that she sat in the last carriage, and that the time was six minutes to five. He always maintained a discreet distance, as he was afraid she might spot him.

He mopped up the last remains of his meal from the plate and drank the water in the glass. His meal was over and a pleasant, heavy drowsiness took hold of him. When he had cleared the table, he lay down on the sofa with a blanket covering him. He lay there with eyes closed. And suddenly he smiled. She had recognised him. Maybe she was thinking about him at this very moment. And tomorrow, then . . . then he would . . .

He slept for almost three-quarters of an hour, then lay there, staring up at the flaking paint for several minutes before he got up. Then he carefully folded the woollen blanket and put it in its usual place in the corner of the sofa. He washed up the cups, and then prepared a cup of instant coffee, which he drank, sitting in the decrepit wing chair in front of the grating and flickering television. It was time for *News of the Day,* and gesticulating men in glasses spoke of war and peace. With furrowed brow he watched them and tried to take in why they were so agitated and angry. Eventually he couldn't take any more and got up and switched off the TV. The square image became a white light that slowly became smaller and smaller. At last it disappeared as a tiny illuminated speck and left only the dull blackness of the screen. It was as if something dead became even deader, and he wanted to think about something else, and then he saw her again, recalled the trim figure in the flowery summer dress, how she had brushed a small hand quickly over her hair as she smiled at him; recalled the moist softness of her lips and teeth, which shone like white, wet marble. He had recorded everything, absolutely everything, in the course of those few seconds.

He got up quickly, took his coffee cup from the table, and put it

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in the washing-up sink in the kitchen alcove. Then he switched on the light over the bookcase, straightened up the lampshade, and moved a little decorative figure of a woman a few inches along the shelf. With a satisfied glance he looked around him. No one could come and say that things were not neat and tidy with him. Yes, in fact, it was so nice that absolutely anyone could come and visit. Absolutely anyone.

After all these years he had become used to the stillness in here, but just now he was more restless than usual. He moved a picture, hung it a little higher up on the wall, and then a little lower. Then he leafed through a magazine, staring at the pictures of the men there. They were all so good-looking, so dignified. Dark, wavy hair, a sharp glint in the blue or green eyes, smooth skin, and fine, white teeth. Even teeth. Suddenly he got up, threw down the magazine, and opened the door to the little bathroom. He put on the light but did not go in at once. First he stood awhile and hesitated, somehow prepared himself before looking in the mirror, still in the never-ending hope that he might see something else than what he knew would be there.

If he put a hand on the left side of his face, he couldn't see the discolored, violet skin. Neither him nor anyone else. The skin had been damaged by boiling water that his mother had poured over him when he was little as he had played on the kitchen floor. She had done a lot "inadvertently," his mother had. But she had screamed at him that it was his own fault. Why on earth was he playing on the kitchen floor exactly there and then?

His large head was almost free of hair, and his wide lips looked like great, bleeding sores on the pale, grey skin that was not discoloured. If he opened his mouth just a little, you could see the sharp, yellow-white teeth. The "vampire," the other workers in the stores used to call him. No, he had a face that should have been hidden away somewhere. But at the same time, he did feel a certain pride, because vampires could terrify, they could create "angst." He looked best with his head plunged deep down inside the lapels of his black coat, with his face as much as possible in the shade of a broad-brimmed hat that he always wore. If it was half-dark in his little hall, and he stood like that in his coat and hat, with his body at a special angle to the mirror, then even he thought that he could sometimes resemble those men in the magazines.

He went back into the living room and tried to calm down. It was still a long time until he could see her again. A long time. The hands on the clock moved painfully slowly. There was a Western movie on at the Eldorado Cinema at nine o'clock. He put on his jacket, his coat, and his hat. He had to get out. Out into the fine, secure murkiness of the evening, down into the shadowy concrete jungle and into the friendly gloom of the cinema.

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The next afternoon, just before five o'clock, he stood at the same spot at the subway station at Valkyrie Square. The tension almost made him sick as he at last heard the distant but well-known clatter from the new train—her train. And then three carriages appeared, brown and fading on their round, creaking bogies.

There she sat, in her usual place, almost at the back of the carriage. This time she did not have a newspaper on her lap. She looked out of the window straight at him. Her eyes were slightly alert and her mouth half open. *She knows that I am standing here, she recognises me,* he thought, and he felt a great desire to smile, to wave to her. *But no, don't smile.* He clenched his lips together and made an almost imperceptible bow towards her. She moved the upper part of her body slightly, but did not remove her gaze from him. *Smile,* he thought. *Smile at me, like you did that time.* He had given her her umbrella and she had smiled. *Yes, you'll get something from me, my girl,* it fairly beat within him. *You'll get . . .*

He went slowly past her and found a place to sit, right at the back of the carriage. Several passengers turned and looked at him and he plunged his head into the lapels of his jacket and pulled his hat even lower down over his brow. He noticed that she turned her head carefully. And then, with a rapid movement, she turned the upper part of her body towards him and focused her large blue eyes on his. She's looking at me, it raced through him, and he wanted to smile, to nod. But she had already turned round again, and all he could see was the long blond hair and the small shoulders beneath a dark brown leather jacket.

No, I can't do it, not here, he thought, but he could not take his eyes off her. She was so lovely. So perfect! Not one single wrinkle to blemish her little face, no trace of ageing. Nothing about her was too angular or too sharp, but nor was it too rounded or too bulky. And all her movements were gracious and harmonious. Just think . . . Think if he could have sat down beside her and put his arm around her. And if she had smiled at him, just like that one time. He drew a deep breath through his nose, and tried to calm down. He couldn't. Not here, with all these people staring.

The subway train passed station after station, and disposed of more and more of its human cargo. Soon the carriage was almost empty. Suddenly she did something unexpected. She got up, went a little way forward in the carriage, and sat down beside an older man with glasses and spoke to him. The man smiled at her. It seemed as if they knew each other.

He remained seated without taking his eyes off her and a sickening feeling of distaste began nagging at him. Then she stole a quick glance back, and he knew that she had not forgotten him. The nagging feeling disappeared and he smiled through pursed lips.

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She alighted at the next stop, together with the older man. When she passed him on the platform outside, she cast a quick glance at him through the window. But she did not smile. He saw them going up a slope and then onto a footpath through a dense pine forest. He leant eagerly against the window and took in his surroundings. Then he gave out a hissing whistle. Now he knew what he would do. It would have to happen the next day. He would wait on her there in the forest.

Next day he clocked out of the brewery earlier than was usual and hurried through the noisy streets of the city to the subway station at the National Theatre. He bought a ticket to the station where she had left the train and then got on. All the time he whistled softly to himself, and the fact that other passengers stared at him did not worry him at all. He felt strong and alive, and at the same time he felt that everyone else in there looked like pallid fish with nasty visages. *They're nothing, I'm not afraid of them,* he thought. *Not afraid of anything.* He revealed his teeth in a blissful smile. A man in front looked at him with a strange, worried expression in his eyes. He liked it, and leant closer, and smiled even more broadly.

There was a sharp, autumnal coolness in the air, and he noticed that he had not put on enough clothes. He had enough time, and he followed the path into the forest and looked searchingly around him and then finally found a suitable spot at the edge of a small bog. The ground was so frozen that he could walk dry-shod across the bog, and he had to keep on the move the whole time to avoid freezing. And then the time began to draw nigh, and so he placed himself beside a thick fir trunk, anxious that she would maybe come early and pass without him being there.

He saw her at two minutes before half-past six. She was on her own. It had become fairly dark, but there were some light bulbs hanging in the trees along the footpath. He pulled his hat further down over his brow and plunged his head into his jacket lapels, keeping in mind all the while the best image of himself in the mirror, and trying to mimic it. As she was about to pass, he took a step forward. She stopped, drew back, and gazed with her big eyes into his.

"What do you want from me?" she said

She didn't sound angry or afraid. Her voice was calm and level. He felt his heart beating faster; she had spoken to him. She had not run away, she was not afraid.

He cleared his throat, and wanted to say something, but he could not get it out. Then he came closer to her, feeling a ripple of pleasure that she had not run away. Her cheeks were slightly flushed, and her blue eyes glittered. He raised a hand to touch her. She stepped back.

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"You want something from me. I know there is something you want from me. Come on, let's go into the forest. We can be together where no one will hear us. Together, just us two."

"Yes," he gave a hoarse whisper. "Yes."

Half with her back to him she began to go along the little forest track on the other side of the footpath. He followed her, but never came within two or three yards, because he was still nagged by the thought that she would turn round and run away from him. *She wants to be with me,* the thought pounded inside him.

About a hundred yards into the forest, she stopped and climbed with delicate movements onto a little stone mound, and stood there facing him, waiting. He could not take his eyes off her, she was like a fairy tale, the shining princess amongst the dark fir trees.

"What is it you want with me?" she asked again, with a wonderful peacefulness in her blue eyes. "I know you want something from me. Come on. Do what you want to do."

Trembling with eagerness, he took what he had in his pocket and brought it out, held it between his shaking hands and went slowly towards her.

She did not draw back, and his feelings became too much for him. He could not pinch his mouth together, he had to smile. His hands approached her throat, he . . .

Suddenly he heard a snapping sound behind him. Someone screamed loudly, and before he could turn around fully, someone pushed him over with enormous force, pushed him so that he lost his balance and fell down from the mound. Only then did he see that he had been standing on the edge of a great cliff, and he screamed with fear, screamed wildly and horribly as he fell. Then he was still. Quite still.

The powerful man with wavy dark hair and even white teeth put a protective arm round the girl, who was still shaking.

"There goes the swine," he said with a quivering voice. "There, the rapist swine got what he deserved."

"Is he . . . dead, do you think?"

The man climbed down the scree like a cat. A few minutes later he was back up again.

"Dead as a dodo. He broke his neck. What a loathsome character! Well, nobody will miss such a monster."

"Good God, no," she said and put her head on his shoulder. "But think if you had come a few moments later. He would have put the rope around my neck and would have strangled me. A strange rope, mind you. It looked like some sort of gold necklace."

The man had spotted something that lay there on the stone mound.

"Yes, it is a necklace. A gold necklace."

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They both examined it eagerly. She held it between her hands and felt its weight.

"Worth at least two thousand pounds," he said. "And now it is yours. Because you have to have something for it. For all the trouble and strife."

Her look no longer wavered. She smiled at him, and her small hand stroked his dark hair.

"Yes, of course. Because it was violence. Violence against a defenceless woman."

The man leant forward and stared down at the motionless dark figure deep down in the chasm.

"Crazy monster, you had it coming to you."

He looked up at the sky.

"Look! It's beginning to snow now. Nobody will know what has happened. In the spring, maybe someone or other will come across him. And everyone will think that the ugly monster committed suicide."

He put his arm around her, and they began to walk through the dark forest. For a while she toyed with the necklace that she had put around her neck. Then she cast a glance up at him and smiled. Her big blue eyes glittered. ●

"Ever since they stood up straight,
there's nothing they won't stoop to."

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FARBER IS CLUELESS

by Gordon Cotler

Aside from his widely acknowledged skill as a detective, Farber's only talent, admittedly a minor one, was in mixing dry martinis. The Farbers honored this accomplishment two or three times a week, restricting themselves almost always to a single bone-chilling masterpiece before dinner. So Sylvie raised an eyebrow in mild surprise as her husband drained the melted ice from his chipped martini pitcher and began preparing a dividend.

"You want to talk about it?" she asked. They were in their cluttered kitchen, the venue for most pre-dinner family conferences.

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"Is there something left to talk about?" Bernie asked. He had added ice and was pouring gin. The conversation until now had been about their elder daughter's boyfriend, specifically his several shortcomings. "I thought we'd pretty much exhausted the subject."

"Not that subject. Something's bothering you. Something at work?" After twenty-three years, Farber never tired of observing, Sylvie could read him like the top line of an eye chart.

He had added the vermouth and was stirring briskly. The rattling ice provided only a momentary diversion. Farber had hoped to shelve his problem for the evening, but there would be no dodging Sylvie's bulldog curiosity. "Life is a bitch," he said. He poured the dividend into his glass. "It's a case. A rotten case, a rotten death, with a victim who deserved better from life. And the worst part is, there's about a snowflake's chance in hell her murder will ever be solved. The department will put more assets into the killing of a mob thug if his name carries some buzz than it will

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into the death of an honest working woman no one ever heard of."

"This happened today?"

Farber settled down with his drink at the kitchen table. "This morning. The victim, Margarita Lacero, was a single mother. She cleaned apartments—one or two a day, five days a week, for regular clients, most of whom were out at work. Half of what she earned went to her sister in the Dominican Republic who takes care of her two children. Every eighteen months Margarita scraped together enough money for a trip home to hug her kids. It was what she lived for. She was due to go in two weeks."

Sylvie murmured, "I don't know if I want to hear this."

"You asked," Bernie said. "The woman had the bad luck this morning to be cleaning the wrong apartment on Riverside Drive when a thief broke in. A neighbor heard a couple of screams and then nothing. The intruder had strangled her, probably with his belt."

"God," Sylvie said. She shivered. "What makes you so sure he'll never be caught?"

"According to the Kahanes—the couple who own the apartment—nothing was taken. So that closes off one avenue—tracking down stolen property through a fence. The front door lock had been expertly picked and the thief probably wore latex gloves. Which means he was a professional and not likely to jaw about his crime on the street. There's nothing to grab onto here, no prints, no distinctive M.O., just a stroke of bad luck for Margarita Lacero."

Sylvie's focus was elsewhere. "Those children," she murmured. Her blue eyes clouded and she stole a covetous glance at Farber's modest dividend. "Have they been told?"

Farber drew his glass closer to him. "The sister's been called. Not, thank God, by me."

Sylvie took a moment. "Bernie, I hate to say this, but are you sure this was a random crime? I mean, I read all the time about Dominican drug dealers. The money . . ."

"Dominican ballplayers also make big money. So what? Margarita Lacero lived like a church mouse. Nowhere in her life is there even a smell of money. No, there's nothing to go on here. We're absolutely clueless." He drained what remained in the glass. "How about I make the salad?"

"Absolutely," she said. He was going to be in a funk for the rest of the evening and she would be wise to keep him busy. Bernie grew antsy over cases that had no forward movement and little chance of resolution. Sylvie well knew that most of the reason her husband had become a cop had to do with the nourishment he drew from untying knots, bringing closure to nastiness. Very few lines of work offered that kind of satisfaction.

As he reached for the salad bowl high in a cabinet the cell phone on his hip began ringing. That was his business phone and he

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quickly moved his hand to it from the bowl. He flipped open the phone and said, "Farber."

Sylvie watched his concentration as he listened to a long statement from the other end. Farber was far from being a handsome man, but when his mind was at work his intelligence shone through on his usually impassive face. Sylvie had found that intelligence sexy on their very first date. She still did.

"No, you were quite right to call me, Mrs. Kahane," he finally said. "That's why I gave you my card. This may be nothing, but on the other hand it may very well be something. If you give me the Bainbridges' address I'll meet you there in twenty minutes." He looked at Sylvie for understanding as he scribbled in his notebook.

When he hung up, his spirits visibly elevated, Sylvie said, "You see? All is not lost. You have a lead." She was much relieved.

"Is it a lead? It's a report of another clueless crime. Who knows? Maybe two no-clues will add up to something positive. If I'm not going to be home in an hour I'll call." He started for the hall to the front door.

"Wait a second," his wife said. "You can't just leave me hanging."

He stopped. She was right. He spoke rapidly. "Mrs. Kahane's sister has an apartment in a brownstone in Greenwich Village. It was broken into this morning by someone who forced the front door. The Bainbridges were both at work and the intruder could have stayed as long as he wanted. Probably he did. But nothing was taken. Nothing."

"He must have been looking for something. And it wasn't there."

"No," Bernie said. "When a professional thief searches an apartment, he wrecks it—dumps drawers, rips upholstery, the works. This place was left undisturbed."

"Then what—?"

"I don't have the faintest idea. I gotta go."

And he was gone.

Jill Bainbridge and Kate Kahane were not often going to be taken for sisters. Kate, the younger by a couple of years, was blond, short, pert, and perky—a sparrow. Jill, whose apartment they were in, was tall and willowy, with wavy brown hair that fell to her shoulders and a languid air of entitlement. Her pajama-clad four-year-old son clung to her leg and glowered at Farber. Every so often Jill called languidly to her husband, who was in their bedroom listening to the news, to please, for God's sake, come and take the boy. He never did.

The sisters were vastly different but the Bainbridge living room was pretty much like the Kahanes'. Some solid older pieces of furniture in dark wood were mixed with new, cheaper stuff. An inheritance was at work in both apartments. Jill had gotten the

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Baldwin baby grand, Kate the massive mahogany breakfront. From their parents? Farber was looking for . . . he wasn't sure what. Someone with a reason to break into these two apartments on the same day and leave, apparently, with nothing.

"Your parents are dead?"

"Yes," Kate chirped. Once Farber had assured her she was not in any personal danger her nervousness had faded. "They were killed in a car crash three years ago." She looked to Jill to make sure she hadn't spoken out of turn. The women were in their thirties but they still played at Big Sister, Little Sister.

"What did your father do?"

This time Kate waited for Jill to speak. "He was a family doctor," she said, absently tousling the boy's hair. "And if you're wondering about a valuable inheritance that some distant relative is after, no. Daddy left almost everything to Princeton, on the theory that Kate and I and our husbands were quite capable of supporting ourselves." She couldn't help adding, "Princeton was more approving of Daddy's character-building program than Kate and I were."

"We did get mother's jewels," Kate said, her eyes again sliding to Jill for permission to speak. "Divided very fairly, don't you agree, Jillsy? Jill got the blue-white engagement ring, the pearl necklace, and the gold bracelet. I got the diamond butterfly pin, the emerald earrings, and the sapphire dinner ring."

"None of which was stolen," Farber said. "Because you keep your good jewelry in a bank vault?" he prompted.

"No way," said Jill. "What would be the point? The pieces would never get worn. Do you know that pearls lose their luster if they aren't worn? My jewelry's in a Florentine leather box that sits on my dresser."

"Mine's in a drawer in the bathroom," Kate said. "It was the first place I looked after they took away poor Margarita. Nothing was touched."

"I went for my jewels like a shot," said Jill. "Also untouched. And that leather box might as well flash a neon sign with a big green arrow, 'Come and get it.' "

Kate emitted a tinkling laugh that acknowledged Jill as the witty sister.

"Okay, so the break-ins weren't about money," Farber said. "You're going to have to help me here, ladies. What else could they be about? Something that involves you both."

The sisters were shaking their heads, at a loss. Farber tried to kick-start their imaginations. "How about this? Is there someone in both your lives you've turned against recently? Who's looking to stir up trouble?"

There was a long silence and then Jill allowed herself a slowly

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breaking smile. "I like that. You mean maybe we shared a—" she glanced at the child—"l-o-v-e-r and we jointly decided to dump him?"

"Oh, Jill!" Kate shrieked. "You wish!"

The boy tugged at his mother's arm. "Mommy, what's a l-o-b-r?"

"Joel," she said with an embarrassed laugh, "why don't you go see what Daddy is doing?"

But the boy only clung tighter and shot Farber a dark look.

"No," Jill said, straight-faced again. "Kate and I are close but we have totally different circles of friends. And no relatives in this part of the country."

"Nobody who touches both your lives? A doctor? Lawyer? Personal trainer?" They were shaking their heads. "How about Margarita?"

"Of course!" they exclaimed together. And Jill added, "Margarita worked for us both. But I hadn't seen her in months, maybe a year. She has—had—her own key and I put her wages in a kitchen drawer. By the time I left the office at five and picked up Joel from day care she'd be long gone. The arrangement was strictly a business one."

"Same with me," Kate said. "It must be over a year since I saw Margarita last. Of course, I would sometimes call her from the office with special cleaning instructions, but that's about it. There was never anything personal between us."

It was an avenue he would set aside to explore later. For now they were back to square one. Having to wait for answers when he worked a homicide was to be expected. But not even knowing what questions to ask was a new one for Farber. A pair of experienced detectives on the Upper West Side were on the Kahane case, a higher-priority one since it featured a brutal homicide, and two neophytes from a precinct here in the Village were on the Bainbridge break-in. Under ordinary circumstances the latter would get scant attention, but Farber would make sure it was coordinated with the Kahane case. There was a slim chance routine inquiries in Margarita's world and among the circles the sisters traveled in would turn up a lead. But it was a very slim chance.

What he was going to do now was make as graceful an exit as he could, first reassuring the sisters that from every indication he believed they were in no personal danger. He wished he didn't appear so damned all-knowing in these situations. The women were looking at him as though they expected a blinding stroke of insight that would clear the air.

But as he opened his mouth to speak, things took a turn for the better. Wisdom can come from the mouths of babes, and in this case the babe was four-year-old Joel Bainbridge. "Where's my pony picture?" the boy wailed. "I want my pony picture!" He was addressing his mother and tugging at her hand, but one eye was on the stranger, Farber, as the likely culprit.

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"Joel, you're being a pest," Jill said. "It's way past your bedtime and you know perfectly well that your pony picture is on the piano."

"Not!"

All eyes turned to the piano. A dozen or more family photos in an assortment of frames were centered on a shawl running across its top. "You're right," Jill said. "What on earth happened to the pony picture?"

"You mean she had told you over and over that nothing was stolen and all the time she was missing an eight-by-ten photo in a fancy frame?" Sylvie had waited till they were on coffee to hook Farber into talking about his trip to the Bainbridges'.

He said, "Sylvie, you and I have at least a dozen family photos in the bedroom. We look past them, through them, even at them, morning and night. How often do we actually *see* them? How quickly would you notice that the picture of the girls in the canoe was missing?"

"I love that picture. Don't you love that picture?"

"I adore that picture. The point is, if you're looking to see what a burglar took, you look for your jewels, your TV, your hi-fi. You don't look—"

"Okay, okay."

"Jill had ordered a copy for her sister when she saw how well the picture came out. So I had Kate call her husband at home . . ."

"Don't tell me her picture was missing."

"It was missing. From a sideboard filled with family photos."

Sylvie was percolating. She could hardly contain her excitement. "What does the boy's father do?"

"He's on Wall Street."

"Exactly," Sylvie breathed.

"Exactly what?" Farber wanted to know. He could swear steam was issuing from his wife's ears.

"Is this too much of a stretch?" Sylvie's words came in a rush. "The father deals with stocks and such. Two pictures of his son are seized from among dozens of family photos. Could this be a message that the boy himself may be seized if the father doesn't do as he is told to manipulate something or other in the market?"

"Sylvie, don't hyperventilate. The father sells printing to brokerage houses. He doesn't have the power to manipulate a nail file. In the second place, rather than break into homes to steal family pictures and incidentally kill a poor cleaning woman, wouldn't the bad guy have done as well with a couple of threatening phone calls?"

"It was just a thought," Sylvie murmured. And then, a challenge, "So what do you think this is about?"

"I'm not going to guess. Mrs. Bainbridge gave me the photogra-

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pher's card. His shop opens at ten A.M. I'll be there. Would you like more coffee or have you had enough caffeine for the day?"

"Alberto Cinci, *photographer,*" the card said. *"Preserve life's precious moments."*

The address was on a street of modest stores in Chelsea, a dozen blocks north of the Bainbridges' Village apartment. The shop's dusty window held a sampling of Mr. Cinci's work—bridal pictures, christenings, golden anniversaries, and other precious moments. The compositions were standard; they tapped into photography's roots. Farber would not have been surprised to find among them a shot of Ulysses S. Grant, stiff-necked in front of his tent.

A notice on the window proclaimed the store's hours to be ten to seven, but at nearly eleven A.M. the door was still locked. An adjoining alcove proved to be the entrance to the four floors of apartments above. Farber pushed into the small vestibule and examined the tenants' names opposite the row of buzzers. Alberto Cinci was on the third floor. He pressed and prepared to identify himself, but there was no need; a return buzz came almost instantly and he let himself in.

On the third floor the door was opened by a slim, intense young man—Al Pacino at twenty. Definitely not the photographer. "I'd like to see Mr. Cinci," Farber said, and reached for his ID.

Again there was no need. The young man said, "Of course. It's nice of you to come. I'm Paul, his youngest grandson. This way."

Farber followed him through a musty parlor with drawn shades. The furniture was old and ponderous. Eight or ten people, some of whom looked like Pacino at forty and fifty, talked in quiet groups. They shot Farber curious looks as he passed. Paul opened a door and Farber stepped into a bedroom. The grieving widow, in layers of black, sat at the head of a coffin that was propped on chairs. From its depths, the ancient photographer faced the stamped tin ceiling, impassive and waxy.

"Grandma," Paul said softly, "this is a friend of Grandpa. Mr. . . . ?"

"Farber. Bernard Farber," Farber said, rearranging his face for a condolence call. "I'm deeply sorry for your loss, Mrs. Cinci."

"Thank you, Mr. Fabrio." Her voice quavered with age or emotion. "I regret I do not know all Alberto's friends. You are from the boccie league . . . ?"

"A fan, not a player. Alberto was a wonderful man and an equally wonderful photographer." Farber was on a roll. "We shall all miss his inspiring presence, but not as much as you."

The widow nodded. Farber mumbled, "My thoughts and prayers are with you," and backed out of the room, tugging Paul's sleeve as a signal to follow.

A bathroom lay across the hall and Farber pulled him in and

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closed the door. He held his ID to the young man's considerable nose and said, "Detective Lieutenant Farber, NYPD. When did he die?"

The young man was startled for an instant, but only an instant. He had half-expected this. "Yesterday morning."

"Of what?"

"Apparently he fell off a ladder in the shop and broke his neck. They said he was too old to climb ladders. He was eighty-four and I can tell you he wasn't too old for boccie. You should have seen him play. He was murdered, wasn't he?"

"Can you get me in downstairs?"

Paul nodded vigorously.

He unlocked the door, turned on a light, and led Farber into the shop. It hadn't been redecorated in Farber's lifetime. The stale air was heavy with the pungent smell of developer chemicals seeping from a back room. Three or four cameras, from a massive portrait antique down to a Rolleiflex, were stacked in a corner with a couple of heavy wooden tripods. None of this equipment was less than fifty years old. In another area an assortment of lights and reflectors, a few ornate props, and some interchangeable backdrops announced the "studio." A five-foot ladder gave access to a light bar.

"This is the lethal ladder?" Farber asked.

"A customer found him at the foot of it."

"Uh-huh. Tell me about the pony pictures."

"Grandpa's regular business was always lousy in the summer. He had an arrangement with this guy in New Jersey to bring his pony in twice a week in July and August. Mabel's a beauty, a high-stepping pinto with a red saddle and some kind of fancy doodad strapped between her ears. Grandpa would walk her through different neighborhoods lugging a camera and one of these heavy tripods. *His* father had done pretty much the same thing back in the nineteen thirties. The mothers would practically chase Gramps down the street to nail a picture of their kids on horseback for the relatives. That pony was a real moneymaker. Here, let me show you."

He walked to the shop window. A velvet curtain separated the back of the window from the shop and he pulled it aside far enough to allow him to stick his head through. His voice floated back to Farber muffled by the curtain. "That's funny," he said, and then he reappeared.

Farber said, "It's not there, is it?"

Paul was too absorbed in his puzzlement to notice that Farber was way ahead of him. "He had a pony picture in this back corner, between the bride and the twins. It's gone."

"Did he keep a file of the negatives?"

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"He sure did. He counted on reorders for the relatives." He motioned Farber to follow him to the back room.

A metal file cabinet stood behind the enlarger. "Bainbridge," Farber said.

The envelopes were arranged alphabetically and Paul quickly found the one labeled Bainbridge in black ink. He handed it to Farber. It was empty.

Farber said, "What else would have been in the envelope besides the negative?"

"The addresses of everybody who was sent a print."

Farber's jaw tightened. If the old man had been less organized, Margarita Lacero would be hugging her children in a couple of weeks.

"This is where we caught up with the photographer leading that absolutely darling pony," Jill Bainbridge said. "It was a Saturday morning about two months ago. Joel and I were on our way to do food shopping." She rumpled the boy's hair in acknowledgment of his presence.

Jill had led Farber to a mixed commercial and residential stretch of a relatively quiet West Village street. Joel marched between them. Once his mother had explained that the tall man was a police officer, the boy had been more accepting of Farber's presence.

"Do you think you can pinpoint where the picture was taken?" Farber said.

Jill walked languidly up the street a dozen yards and then about halfway back. She was enjoying playing detective. "This is it." She turned to Joel. "Isn't this where you got on the pony?"

"No, Mommy," the boy said, and pointed to a spot a few feet further along. "In front of the candy store."

"Are you sure?" Farber said.

"Yes, because I was looking in the candy-store window at the Halloween masks from on top of the pony. They were scary."

"Good, Joel. You could be a policeman." The boy swelled with pride.

Farber turned to Jill. "So the photographer had his back to the candy store and faced the street?"

"That's right," Jill said, "but are you sure it was here, Joel, and not in front of the haircut place?"

"I'm sure," Joel said.

"What was that about?" Sylvie demanded. They were on soup, a thick, mostly lima bean potage, a specialty of Sylvie's that would be a meal in itself in most households but was merely an appetite stimulant in this one. "Was there something funny about the candy store? Or what?"

"Not the candy store. There was something funny across the

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street. God, I love this soup." He shook his head in wonder and, sensing Sylvie's impatience, quickly resumed his narrative. "A ground-floor window in a small apartment house that had to have been over the boy's shoulder in the pony picture." He put down his spoon and looked at his wife, his eyes dancing. "The mailbox listed the tenant as Theresa Colvese." He waited expectantly.

"So?" said Sylvie.

"You don't know the name Colvese?"

Slowly, "No . . ."

"How about Gino 'Knuckles' Colvese?"

"Doesn't ring a bell." Deadpan. "Unless you mean Knuckles Colvese, the well-known microbiologist."

"Don't be a smartass. I mean Knuckles Colvese, the mob capo. Wanted for a double murder two years ago. Not my case, but he made a media splash at the time. The department stopped looking for him six months ago, when it had what it believed to be convincing evidence that he had skipped the country."

"He hadn't?"

"He hadn't. Apparently he crawled out of his hole and visited his mother on the day Alberto Cinci chose to work Mrs. Colvese's street with his camera and pony. Knuckles must have passed in front of that window at the moment Joel Bainbridge was being immortalized sitting on Mabel."

"How can you know that? Have you arrested Colvese? Or do you at least have a copy of the photograph?"

"No on both."

"So you're speculating, based on the coincidence of Mama Colvese's window being in Cinci's line of sight. It all seems highly unlikely. Knuckles' face would have to have been so small in the picture as to be hardly noticed."

"Small to you and me, and hardly noticed. Enormous in the eyes of a Mafia capo with an inflated self-image. One of Knuck's crew must have spotted the photo in Cinci's shop window and panicked the boss."

"That sounds like a guess."

"Not entirely. I'm going to cut to the chase, because I want to finish this soup before it goes stone cold. When I told Mrs. Colvese that Alberto Cinci had been killed for one of his photographs she broke down and wept. And during that spasm of grief she let slip just enough to give us a leg up. We're going to nail Knuckles and his hit man."

"What came over the woman?"

"Alberto Cinci had taken her bridal pictures. She and her late husband are memorialized in a cardboard frame bearing his logo that sits on her bedside table. One of 'life's precious moments,' lovingly preserved for nearly fifty years." ●

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Art by June Levine

SCHOOL DAZE

by Budge Burgess

Wakening is the stuff of dreams, the body blundering along on autopilot, the mind pinballing between harsh reality and silky fantasies of the coming day. Normally, it took the smell of fresh morning coffee to transform her from dozy zombie into something akin to a functioning member of the human race. Normally—even if her sleep pattern had been disrupted these last few weeks. She was over Andy, that she knew. Life just hadn't quite returned to normal. Yet.

This morning the clock radio buzzed with adrenaline urgency, preempting her coffeepot's wake-up call. Normally, the local news was monotonously predictable—the price of sheep at market, concerns the river might burst its banks, warnings of traffic congestion on the Glasgow road, yet another local worthy complaining about the seagulls' noise. Normally.

This morning, a breathless announcer described the armed robbery.

Carol absorbed the report, her daydreams given sudden energy and focus. She calculated precisely where, on the eighteenth-

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century military road, the ambush had taken place. She could visualize the spot—she'd cycled it scores of times. An isolated place on a lonely stretch, near the coast of southwest Scotland: off the beaten track and of no interest to anyone . . . save a curious sheep or cow, or seagull. There was no doubt what would be the subject of conversation in the staff room today.

She collected homework jotters, books, and the assorted bits and pieces which were the tools of her trade, and carried them to the utility room at the cottage rear, where she stabled her bicycle. She followed her morning routine, distributing her stuff between front basket, side panniers, and rucksack, then wheeled the machine out to celebrate the day.

A story of Scotland by a writer from Dumfries, "School Daze" brings together heart-pounding chases, mystery, and police procedure. The author, Budge Burgess, writes a monthly column for *Writers' News*, the United Kingdom's leading print magazine for writers. Widely published in Britain, he has also had stories in print in the United States, including last year's "Heritage Trail" for *EQMM*. †

The morning was one of bright, autumnal promise—mellow fruitfulness, the poet called it. Beyond her tightly fenced garden, undulating fields of barley pressed in claustrophobically. Three-quarters of a mile distant, her nearest neighbors, the Crawfords, were already about their business. Carol wondered if the farmer and his wife had discussed the robbery over breakfast.

She followed her normal route, a narrow country road which flirted with the river's edge and leveled invigorating views across the broad estuary. Criffel loomed in the distance, top clear of cloud, heathered slopes finely etched against the clarity of the blue sky. Geese, swans, ducks, and other birds toiled at the water's edge or drifted on the current. There was little evidence of human life . . . or of the excitement she felt.

It had never struck her before, but this was the perfect environment for a robbery. True, there was more money moving around cities, but anyone wanting to commit a crime with certainty of few witnesses and no cameras to record the incident would choose a country road. Assuming they knew when and where an armored van was ripe for harvest.

By the time she reached the outskirts of town, she was fantasizing about larceny. It took three armed men mere moments to empty the van. She could imagine the exhilaration, the tension . . . the fear. Recruiting a team of desperadoes was one problem. First, she'd have to study the routines of armored vans; even she recog-

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nized that such information must depend on an insider's knowledge and collusion. She smiled to herself as she wove through the first evidence of traffic congestion; maybe she'd watched too much television.

She dismounted to wheel her bike into the playground, pondering the task of acquiring weapons for her perfect crime. The radio announcer said that the robbers carried Russian rifles—as readily available as High Street toys . . . if you knew which High Street to visit.

Around her, scores of children were busy skipping, kicking ball, standing in conspiratorial knots, or fleeing the embrace of a parent. The scene greeted her most mornings.

Today, however, Alan Geddies, the headmaster, bore down on her with purpose. He rarely emerged from his office until nine A.M., and was never seen in the playground lest he be ambushed by parents about little Jimmy's place in the football team, little Mary's role in the nativity play, or the state of the leaking roof. Carol replayed recent classroom performances, sure he must be about to censure her for some misdemeanor or professional failing. She had, she knew, been distracted of late, thanks to Andy. Still, she couldn't imagine what she'd done wrong. Parents' evening, the night before last, had gone particularly well.

"Bit of a problem this morning, Carol. 'Fraid you won't be able to take your class as normal. We had a break-in last night. Vandals. Your classroom's been trashed. The damage is extensive. I don't know when we'll get it back into use."

She hurried round the back of the main building to the pair of isolated, prefabricated huts erected there as a temporary measure, some nineteen years ago. The peeling paint, cracked windows, and rain-stained walls of her box classroom looked exactly as yesterday morning.

Inside was a different story. Desks and chairs overturned; shelves emptied, paints, papers, books, building blocks, and educational toys spilled across the floor; plastic, card, and clay models rudely trampled and smashed; curtains slashed; the ageing computers lying lifeless on a floor flooded from an overflowed sink, their hollowed monitors gaping like the windows of a derelict tenement. "Trashed" was an inadequate word; "vandals" hardly described the ferocity and frenzy of this violation. One word, however, dominated the scene: Livid across the wall above her desk, someone had smeared "SLUT."

Charlie Miller, the school's liaison policeman, stood talking to two figures in suits, one male, the other female. They turned to inspect Carol, exchanging nods and raised eyebrows.

"Ah, Miss Cameron." Charlie paced forward, suits in train. "Glad you're here. We seem to have a bit of an enigma."

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It wasn't kids, male suit—Detective Sergeant Johnston—explained. The violence visited upon her classroom was too sustained, too organized, too systematic.

Female suit—Detective Constable Kelly—was solicitous, gently inquiring, "Is there anyone, anyone in your personal life, who might bear a grudge?"

The interview—more like patronizing interrogation—lasted twenty minutes. The suits were efficient. They wanted this one wrapped up quickly so they could get back to more serious business. Catching armed robbers was real policing.

The suits inquired into Carol's personal life. Had she fallen out with anyone recently, anyone who might be aggrieved or inclined to believe she'd been inappropriate in her sexual favors? Anyone who might have cause to write the word "SLUT" above her desk?

"How about boyfriends, Miss Cameron?" Kelly probed. "Any special male friends?"

Carol shook her head. "No. No. I . . ."

"I gather you recently ended a relationship?"

"Yes. A month ago. There's no . . . He wouldn't . . ."

Kelly nodded. Johnston nodded. Charlie nodded.

"His name and address?" Kelly flipped the page in her notebook as if she were flipping the switch on a cattle prod.

When they left, Carol felt weary. Her heart was thumping, her chest taut, her breathing labored, her mind congested with emotional homework. She perched against a work surface, searching for rational explanation, until Mrs. Delaney, the cleaner, brought tea.

"Are you aw right, dear? The headmaster's asked Mrs. Simpson tae tak your class. He says the police have finished here an' we can get on tidyin' up."

And tidy up they did. With the help of a couple of parent volunteers they salvaged what they could. Scrubbing the wall clear of its message was a fruitless task: The word might be erased from the classroom, but Carol knew it had already escaped into town, to be repeated, interpreted, exaggerated, and amplified on the local "worldwide web" of gossip.

It was gone six P.M. by the time she adjusted the last chair and satisfied herself the room was back to normal. Or what passed for normal. The place would never be the same. Physically exhausted, emotionally drained, she stood in the doorway, her silhouette caught in the shaft of light which speared into the dark playground. For a minute or two she contemplated not going home. She didn't think she could face the loneliness of the ride, pedaling her memories and suspicions along that long road. She wondered about phoning a friend in town to ask if she could stay the night.

"Pull yourself together." She sucked her lip determinedly.

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"Pull yourself together." She kept repeating it as a mantra while she reloaded her bike and rucksack, doused the lights, locked up, and set off across the yard.

By the time she reached the town's outskirts some sort of rhythm had returned to her limbs and a resilient determination was blossoming. Once in the country, loneliness and despair again overtook her. Could she really face a night alone?

She tried to focus on the familiar: the sounds of the river lapping near the roadside; the unmistakable smell of tidal waters pressing against the current; the soft outline of Criffel framed by starlight; the light breeze, chill on her face; the occasional house with wafted promise of hearty meal and secure homeliness.

She tried to focus on the fantastic, rekindling plans for armed robbery. How did you acquire Russian automatic rifles and ammunition? They were alien artifacts, beyond her ken. Who, in a small town like Dumfries, would know where to get them?

As she rode along the final straight leading to her cottage, she became dimly aware of a car's headlights picking her out in their beam. She listened to its approach, slowing and gently piloting her bike tighter in to the edge.

The lights drew closer, her shadow sharpening on the road ahead. It was coming fast. Too fast. Had the driver not seen her? She was too fraught, too on edge to take the risk. As she pulled in to the verge and prepared to dismount, the car roared alongside, clipping the handlebar and spilling her into a grassy ditch.

She struggled to escape the bondage of briars and sparse, rudely trimmed hawthorn which punctuated the roadside fence; she was too bruised and shaken to notice the car brake and halt, engine left running, some forty yards down the road. But she noticed the driver emerge and stand looking towards her bike, front wheel twisted, lamp still beaming.

As she levered herself up, fighting pain and indignity, the figure spotted her and advanced. Anger and a long day of tension instructed her response. She rehearsed a choice of epithets to level at the lunatic. She could think of a whole thesaurus of names to call the madman.

Names?

She remembered the name scrawled across the classroom wall. Five years cycling this route without mishap! It was too much of a coincidence. She stared at the approaching shape. There was nothing conciliatory, concerned, or apologetic about his demeanor. His walk had a threatening purpose.

Carol clambered over the fence, her left shoe catching on a bough and dropping away. She tumbled onto the bitter ground beyond, scrambled upright, and raced into the field. Glancing back, she made out the man silhouetted against the glimmer of

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her bicycle light. She dropped and lay still in the blackness, struggling to control her breathing.

He lurked, disconcerted, then busied himself with the bike. She couldn't imagine what he was doing, maybe visiting his rage on the poor machine by letting its tires down? From the corner of her eye she became aware of another car approaching, half a mile off. He heard it, too, heard it or saw it, for he abandoned assault, ran to his vehicle, and accelerated away.

The second car slowed, cruised up to the bicycle's distress light, and stopped. Two figures emerged and hurried to inspect the scene of the accident. She heard voices calling.

"Carol! Miss Cameron! Are you all right? Carol!"

Old Mr. Crawford with his slight limp, and the generously rounded Mrs. Crawford! Carol raised herself from the cold ground and began to stumble towards them, voice croaking.

She was still wailing and shaking as she sat in their kitchen, the elderly pair fussing and fretting. Mrs. Crawford wrapped her in a thick blanket, treated her to sweet tea, hot soup, and soul-warming whisky. Mr. Crawford phoned the police, muttering and tutting, incessantly shaking his head.

"Idiots like that ought tae be locked up," he growled. "Locked up. Near killin' an' scarin' half tae death a pare wee lassie like that. Ought tae be locked up."

"Aye, pare soul. Look at ye, shakin' an' scared," confirmed Mrs. Crawford, patting Carol's hand and glowing with the resolute warmth of a potbellied furnace.

The policeman who arrived an hour later was apologetic—Carol didn't catch his name.

"Sorry, we're at full stretch at the moment. Everybody's busy with the robbery."

He took a statement, commented on the dangers of country roads after dark, promised to visit the scene of the accident in daylight, see if anything might help identify the vehicle.

"Will you be all right on your own tonight? You've had a trying day by all accounts."

Mr. Crawford showed him to the door; Mrs. Crawford offered to make up the spare bed.

Carol was insistent. She wanted to go home. If she didn't, it, too, would start to harbor fears she could do without. Mr. Crawford ran her back and waited while she hunted out keys. As she opened her front door she discovered the very fears she could do without.

She screamed. Stood and screamed. And screamed!

The sitting room echoed her classroom. Furniture overturned, soft furnishings slashed, broken ornaments and plant pots strewn over the floor, personal treasures scattered pell-mell. Foodstuffs and crockery shards choked the kitchen floor. Her bedroom had

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been abused, the bed now a Jackson Pollock of violently flourished makeup, razor slashes, and shredded underwear. Smeared above it in lipstick was the legend "WHORE."

Carol retched up tea, soup, whisky, and acid bile until she thought her stomach might implode. Mr. Crawford stood in the doorway, frozen in incomprehension.

This time, DS Johnston and DC Kelly called. The concern on their faces was obvious. Kelly abandoned her earlier detachment, cleared a space on the couch, and cuddled Carol. Johnston prowled self-consciously, unsure where to start, unable to prize his mind from the significance of that red-letter commentary on the wall.

"We talked to Mr. Jamieson this afternoon. It seems he was home alone last night, with no one to confirm his story."

Carol stared blankly, wondering why Andy's whereabouts last night was relevant to the destruction of her home.

"The vandalism to your classroom, Miss Cameron. We . . ."

"You can't think he had anything to do with that?"

Kelly squeezed her shoulder. "Carol, someone has some pretty weird ideas about you. Are you sure you really know Andy?"

Three years was long enough to know most people. Andy had faults, but nothing like this.

"He's not violent. He's not vindictive. It just wasn't going anywhere. We both agreed. I'm not used to it yet, not used to being . . . single, really single again. But we parted as friends. Andy wouldn't do this."

Lying in the stone fireplace were the remains of a cut-glass decanter he'd bought her. He'd loved it. They both had. No delusional insanity could induce him to damage it.

"It's not Andy. It can't be Andy."

She endured another interrogation, more sensitive, more openly concerned. Both officers were taking these incidents seriously—seriously enough to make the armed robbery pale in significance. Carol could feel fear percolating through her blood. She fought it with the only sane emotion she could muster. Anger. It spiraled up her spine and flooded her body with a wave of adrenaline. DC Kelly—Maggie—felt the teacher's body tense, renewed strength pulsing through her muscles.

Maggie smiled. "Can you stay with friends tonight?" She glanced at Mr. Crawford.

"No. I'm not going to be driven from my home by some madman. I'm staying right here."

She could not be dissuaded, despite the invasion of the forensic team and the humiliation of seeing her underwear and secrets being fingered and studied. She caught glimpses of one officer handling the cups of a frilly red bra. Another waved a suspender belt at his colleague. Her rage boiled.

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Maggie sighed. "We'll not leave you alone tonight. Would you like me to stay with you?"

Carol almost accepted. But, sooner or later, she had to face the cottage on her own. To have a stranger maintain vigil might weaken her resolve, make her dependent on others.

"No, I'd rather be on my own. I need to tidy up. I need to do things, to keep busy."

She watched DS Johnston lift an erotic novel from the shambles, his eyebrows arching.

"It's my life," said Carol, snatching the book away. "I want it back. I've done nothing wrong. I've nothing to be ashamed of. I simply want my privacy back."

They compromised, posting a police car outside her cottage. A boyish constable would keep watch through the night.

"If you're worried by anything, I'll be just outside." He smiled shyly, still young enough to feel intimidated in the presence of a teacher . . . even one only a few years older than himself.

As the police finally drifted away, Carol heard the call of her cottage. It was bruised and battered, like her. Tonight, they needed one another.

"Sorry, wee house," she murmured. "Shall we see if we can sort things out?"

The adrenaline gave her sustainable energy to begin the cleanup. The bedroom would wait. She concentrated on the sitting room, conscious that when exhaustion finally hit she would be able to flop on the couch.

She sped round and around the cottage with the frenetic energy of a cartoon character. By two A.M., she'd made a visible impact. By two-thirty, she was too drained to care. She elected to sit down for a minute. Just a minute. Put her feet up on the couch for just a minute. The nightmares began instantly: the delicious, reassuring, routine nightmares of homework to mark and lessons to plan and weekend shopping to do.

She woke suddenly. No clock radio to summon her back, but something had alarmed her. The lights were on. The unfamiliar dereliction of her sitting room startled her. But the tension in her body and alertness of her senses were also unfamiliar, quite unlike her normal zombielike state of a morning. Something was very wrong.

She heard a noise from the kitchen, like the sound of a foot grating on the spill of lentils she hadn't yet cleared from its vinyl floor. She raised herself from the couch, turning her head and shoulders in the process. Was that a shadow on the kitchen wall?

She launched herself at the front door and exploded into the night in one supercharged movement. The police car slept idly at the roadside, enveloped in darkness. As she ran for it, she tripped and

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fell over . . . something. She found herself lying across the body of the young policeman! She shook him. He was warm and breathing, but his face seemed to be sticky and wet, his wrists handcuffed.

The light in her doorway blinked out, eclipsed by a tall figure. It wasn't Andy. It wasn't anybody she knew. And yet . . . there was something about the silhouette.

Something.

As the figure peered into the night, evidently listening for the sounds of her running feet, she fumbled vainly around the policeman's equipment belt and jacket, searching for a radio. As the shadow moved from the cottage and merged into the darkness, she looked for a weapon. The truncheon came to hand—a puzzling, telescopic device which initially confused her. She flexed it briefly, satisfying herself of its weight and balance, mentally rehearsing cuts, thrusts, and parries before sprinting across to the other side of the road.

She kept low until she slid down onto the flat merse grass—coarse, tufted hummocks of reclaimed land. She stayed down, hauling herself over the muddy surface, batteries recharged by the invigorating salt sea smell. Above, cloud curtained the earth from moon and starlight.

She'd gone some fifty yards before she realized her mistake. She was heading away from the Crawfords' farm, the nearest prospect of safety. The man, whoever he was, was between her and sanctuary.

She edged back to the road, straining for sight or sound of the intruder, searching her imagination for an escape plan.

She waited by the road's edge, tense, ready to run, grateful she hadn't taken off her trainers before falling asleep. There was no evidence of movement, no sign of any car save the policeman's. She mapped out the scene. He must have parked in one of the field entries, somewhere back along the road to Dumfries. If he'd approached from the direction of the Crawfords' farm, the policeman would have spotted him.

But where was he now? Lying in wait, second-guessing her movements, ready to pounce when she broke cover? She had to get across the road and into the barley field—she was too exposed here, her escape cut off by the river. Where was he hiding? Could she risk a dash?

Off to her right she heard a slumbering duck quack in alarm. There! Over there! She sprang from concealment like a First World War soldier quitting the trenches. No machine guns to worry about, just the fence with its strands of barbed wire.

She vaulted it with surprising agility, a steel barb slashing her palm. Landing wasn't so elegant. She flopped heavily on the ground, knees and elbows jarring loudly.

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Was that movement? Had she heard something? She couldn't afford to wait, but set off like an Olympian hare, sprinting across the uneven earth for all she was worth.

Her body ached, her lungs felt like cheese being grated, her mind was obsessed with visions of pursuers closing in. She ran deep into the field and darkness, away from the road, until exertion forced her to dive down and recover her breath.

Through the deafening roar of hoarse breath and bounding heart she listened for sounds of his approach. Nothing. She rolled onto her back and levered herself up on her elbows. A half-moon peeked through a gap in the clouds and glinted briefly on the estuary's mud flats. The lights of Dumfries glowed on the horizon. No sign of human movement. Had he given up, gone already? Somewhere, across the fields, the Crawfords' farm was hidden from view.

She felt her way towards it, slowly, senses alert. Nagging at the back of her brain was the man's silhouette. Something about his shape and size. Something familiar. Someone she'd met? Someone who'd ogled her in a pub one evening? Someone with a penchant for slim blondes and fantasies about D-fittings?

She struggled across field boundaries, scratching herself on hawthorn and barbed wire. She heard her sweatshirt rip, felt her jogging pants tear. Into the last field, and she could make out the slab shape of the Crawfords' farmhouse.

What if he was waiting there? But that silhouette . . . If she could put a name to it, would she finally understand what was happening and why?

She stopped some thirty yards short of the farmyard. Had he guessed this is where she'd head? It seemed obvious. He must be waiting. She gripped the truncheon firmly. If she could get close enough to deliver one blow, he'd never see it coming in the darkness. Forget the movies. None of this one blow then run, leaving him time to recover and pursue. No, one blow to blind him with pain, then keep hitting him until he was incapable of anything. She searched for the anger and strength to fuel her violence, choreographing the assault—whack, whack, whack . . . kick, stamp, kick . . . whack, whack, whack.

Maybe she'd never train a rifle on a security guard, but she'd certainly beat this bastard!

Rifle? Something about an automatic rifle? Something about that figure, that shape, that man. She'd never seen anyone carrying an automatic rifle, but she'd seen him before . . . and she somehow associated him with an automatic rifle. A Russian one.

She buried her face in the cold grass. Where had she seen him before?

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Parents' evening! He'd been at parents' evening! She'd met him at school. A big man.

But his face? His name?

She dredged up the class register from memory. Adams. Brown. Batchelor. Collins. . . . Which one had a big father? . . . Logan. MacAuley. McLaine.

McLaine? McLaine? Stevie McLaine's dad! She got the picture! The clarity of recognition ebbed in a cloud of self-pity. Why did this have to happen to her? Why her?

She sucked on her lip. "Pull yourself together. Now! Pull yourself together!"

She dug her nails into the earth as if searching for a grip on reality.

It had happened, it was still happening, but now she had an advantage. McLaine didn't know she'd worked it out. Instead of running to the safety of the Crawfords', maybe she should strike out across country for Dumfries. A couple of hours' walk? Rough going in the dark, but no risk of discovery.

She crawled away from the Crawfords', keeping low, heading towards the glow of streetlights on the distant horizon.

She struggled on, searching out gaps in hedgerow and fence, avoiding the temptation to make for an isolated farmhouse or cottage, mind fixed on the safety of the town-center police station. Nothing else would do.

Bruised, scratched, clothes torn, she finally decided to beat down towards the road. Her journey would be much faster there . . . and she'd hear or see any approaching car. Surely?

She hesitated behind a hedge, studying the road, wrestling with her suspicions. Why not find the nearest house, bang on its door, raise its occupants, and tell her tale? The paranoia was too intense. With her luck, the house she chose would harbor a member of the gang.

"Don't be stupid! Don't be stupid!"

But she couldn't convince herself. Nerves jangled, heart pounded. Head for Dumfries! Head for the police station!

She crept along the road, eyes and ears primed. Her pace picked up, her body remained tense, concerned she might blunder into the verge or twist an ankle in a pothole. On and on, until she was jogging uncertainly, answering the urgent attraction of the glowing horizon, now so close, so close.

She saw headlights and rolled quickly into a ditch. Her grip tightened on the truncheon as the car closed.

Relief coursed through her, making her drunk. The approaching car bore the bright legend "POLICE."

She leapt into the road, waving wildly and forcing the driver to brake hard. She ran to his door, to discover it was the officer who'd

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called at the Crawfords'. He at least knew some of the story, so explanation could be that much quicker.

"Officer, Officer, thank God it's you."

She was ready to embrace him as he stepped from the vehicle.

"There's a man in my cottage. His name's McLaine. I think he wants to kill me."

She noticed a movement in the back of the car. Another figure there, dimly lit. There was something familiar about him, something in the shape and posture she recognized.

Andy!

"Well, then, Miss Cameron, you've led us a merry dance."

She stared at the officer, then back to the figure in the car. Andy seemed to be shaking his head vigorously. His arms appeared to be unnaturally pinioned. There was something harsh and dark across his mouth. As he leaned forward into the dashboard light, she saw wild, staring eyes. She'd never seen him look so scared.

"I'm sorry it has to end like this," said the policeman, "but you're a loose end we can't afford to let flap around."

Carol lashed out with the truncheon as he reached for her. He tried to parry the blow, catching it painfully on his wrist. She heard him squeal as he stepped back, clutching the injured bone. She hesitated, instincts telling her to run, fighting to find the determination to hit him again and again.

She raised the truncheon for a second blow, but he kicked out, his boot catching her below the knee. It was her turn to squeal . . . and to pitch forward onto the ground, clutching at the injury and hearing the truncheon spill from her grasp.

She rolled towards it. His boot crunched down on her outstretched hand, sending pain searing through her being.

"Bitch!"

He kicked wildly at her face, catching her a glancing blow across jaw and cheek which made her mind spin and eyes stream. He grabbed her by the hair and dragged her to her knees.

"It's too late," she yelled, "I know all about McLaine!"

"So you've guessed, eh?" His hand whipped across her face, spinning her sideways. Again he tugged her hair. "Where have you hidden them?"

Through pain, tears, and confusion, she fought for some rational response. She didn't think she could take much of this, but the moment she told him what he wanted to hear, her life was worthless. So was Andy's.

The beating stopped abruptly. The policeman dragged Carol over to his car and pushed her roughly into the passenger seat. Even in darkness, the road was too public a place. As he set off back towards her cottage, Carol knew she had to do something. She grabbed for the steering wheel and tried to spin the car into the ditch.

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But he was too quick and strong. The car swerved marginally but held the road. He jabbed his elbow back savagely, pummeling her face twice. She slumped back, cheek and mouth erupting in blinding pain.

She retained enough sense to play for time.

"It's too late. I've written a letter. To DS Johnston. It explains everything. I posted it in one of those houses . . . back there."

She knew, just knew, that he'd glance into the mirror, trying to recall how many houses they'd passed on the lonely road. Three. Four if you counted the farmstead set half a mile back, up its own bumpy track.

"Assault. Kidnapping. Murder. They just make it worse. Just let us go. Give yourself up. It'll be easiest for you in—"

The elbow which cannoned into the side of her head ended her flirtation with consciousness. She had no recollection of the lights going out. One moment she was in the car . . .

. . . the next, she was lying facedown in the rough merse grass, brain thumping. Andy lay beside her, his absence of movement emphasized by the slow, tidal lapping of the estuary water. The clouds had ebbed and the half-moon imparted an icy clarity to the scene.

Noise behind her caused her to turn, painfully.

"He's gone," the tall figure was calling. "Bastard's gone!"

McLaine. She recognized him. He and the policeman were at her cottage door.

And then she saw lights on the road, coming fast. She could see the convoy closing. The policeman bounded back to his car. McLaine followed. Carol rolled frantically sideways, pushing herself up on unsteady arms to try to get a better view of the scene.

Two police cars sped up. Two more approached from the other direction, blocking the road. As she watched, McLaine and the policeman abandoned their vehicle and made off into the fields. The pursuers screeched to a halt. Figures poured out into the night.

Carol dragged herself into a kneeling position and began waving and yelling . . . or at least choking out something hoarse which might, on a better day, have graduated into a yell. Surely one of them must see her?

A figure blundered out of the darkness and stood over her, calling loudly. She looked up. The young policeman who'd been guarding her, his face pale and smeared with . . . was it blood, or mud, or both?

The power of his voice attracted attention. A silhouette emerged from the tangle of cars and directed a torch beam towards the estuary, searching out the source of the noise.

Maggie looked exhausted as she held Carol tight and escorted

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the teacher back to the warmth and shelter of the cottage. Carol cried and shook, cried and shook.

"There, there, it's all right, you're safe now, safe now."

"How . . . how did you know where to find me?"

"We didn't," confessed Maggie. "Brian—the officer we left watching your cottage—got to your phone and raised the alarm."

It was clear nobody quite knew what was going on. Andy was carried in and laid on her bed. In the kitchen, someone was dabbing at the gash on the young policeman's head. Outside was even greater confusion. Carol caught sight of bemused uniformed officers leading away two men in handcuffs—McLaine and one of their own colleagues.

"What's going on, Carol? What's all this about?"

"The robbery, Maggie. The robbery. They were after me because I could identify the robbers. Only I didn't know it until after they came back to my cottage."

Around midmorning, they drove her back to where she'd been knocked from her bicycle the night before. It seemed such a long time ago. Carol's rucksack was lying in the field. She conjured an exercise book from it, one she'd last seen at parents' evening.

Curious wee Stevie McLaine, always looking for new things to draw. Stevie McLaine, a grand wee artist. She'd sung his praises, showed off his numerous drawings and paintings to a proud mother and father—a petite woman and a big man.

Drawings of computers and cars, of buildings and tractors. Drawings of an automatic rifle, recorded with draughtsmanlike accuracy, drawings she'd assumed he'd copied from a book, drawings which could just as easily have been taken from life. A still life with live ammunition and deadly purpose.

DS Johnston opened a folder and showed her photos of a Russian rifle, the twin of Stevie's drawing. "Young Stevie was a bit too observant," he remarked. "We talked to him earlier. Says he thought it was a toy his dad had hidden for Christmas."

"Certainly created problems for them," said Maggie. "When McLaine saw the drawings he realized he had to destroy them . . . and probably get rid of you, too. Just in case. Make it look like Andy murdered you in some perverse crime of passion then killed himself."

And Carol returned to her cottage. She wanted to clear up the mess, but found herself sitting zombielike on the couch . . . unable to sleep, hardly awake. The coffeepot lay smashed, grounds strewn around the kitchen. So she sat, watching the telephone, waiting for the wake-up call news that Andy was safe, dreaming life would soon get back to normal. ●

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My Little Brother

by Edward Clinton

Several years ago Edward Clinton debuted in *EQMM*'s Department of First Stories; he was new to fiction but not to writing, for he was already an established playwright and a writer for TV and radio. Among his screenplay credits was *Honky Tonk Freeway,* directed by John Schlesinger and starring Jessica Tandy and Hume Cronyn. Mr. Clinton's theatrical background shines through in his fiction, which is full of stark, dramatic scenes. ❡

She had no idea how long she had been dancing. Probably all day. Definitely since the phone call. The CD of Natalie Cole had been at full volume for hours. The music was so loud she hadn't heard her daughter come in. She bumped into her and jostled the schoolbooks cradled in her daughter's arms.

"I have the greatest news," she said after pausing the CD.

Her daughter noticed the wineglass on the mantel.

"Good." The girl headed for her room, her back invisibly girding for the attack she knew would come almost immediately, but none came.

"Well, don't you want to hear the greatest news of the year?"

There were sounds of schoolbooks being dumped, closet bi-fold doors opening and shutting, dresser drawers grumpily doing the same. Shoes being thrown aside.

"What?" her daughter asked, returning to get some milk. "What's your news?"

"My little brother is coming! Here to Port Jackson! He'll be down in Florida in three weeks."

"Oh." The daughter was genuinely taken aback. She tried to smile.

"And more than that—his new play is being done! Here! They're opening the new regional theater downtown with its premiere! My little brother!"

In her ecstasy, she poured herself fresh wine in a clean glass. She quickly returned the sweaty bottle to the refrigerator.

Her daughter watched impassively as her mom clunked the

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huge sloshing green bottle into the nearly empty fridge. She only half-glanced at her mother's partially finished glass of wine on the railroad-tie mantel in the Great Room.

"Mother, he was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize. I don't think he's coming down to Florida for a production of one of his plays at a regional theater. Don't get your hopes up. I don't think he's really coming. He's done this before. I mean, has he ever even seen our house? I don't think so."

"They're paying him five thousand dollars, plus round-trip airfare, plus hotel room. It's like a *prize* or something. If you think he'd let five thousand dollars go without showing up to collect it, you don't know my little brother. He's gonna be staying at the Sand Dollar *in their best room!* I've got to call a few people from choir and Meg and Paul. And Marie! Oh, and Billy! We'll have a cocktail party for him here after the play. Something. We'll decorate it up nice. Something. He's never even seen our house. He has to love it. Don't you think he'll just love it?"

She was flipping through her Rolodex, pulling cards and stacking them, then she went looking for her latest wineglass.

"Somehow I don't see him leaving his townhouse in the Village to come here. If he comes, he comes. That's how you should look at it."

"That new regional theater is going to be one of the most important theaters in all of America. The people opening it got a Tony Award for their production of Tennessee Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire* at Yale. Regional theater is where theater is at now. He told me that," she said as she settled down to her table-sized jigsaw puzzle, having found her wineglass and forgotten her messy pile of Rolodex cards by the phone. "We'll have a party for him," she mumbled. She began to study the ten-thousand-piece picture of the Grand Canyon, missing only its very center.

The daughter took her milk past the built-in bookshelves in the Great Room, which contained the scrapbooks showing his two Broadway shows, the movie filled with stars whose names everyone knew, and the pictures of him from the feature article in *People* a few years back. She went into her room and closed the door and locked it. The house was so quiet they could hear the air conditioning turning on and off. Her daughter knew that soon her mother would be crying and yelling about her childhood and all that it did not contain. She looked at her bedroom door to make sure it was locked.

He did arrive. He did leave tickets for both of them at the box office. The play was a huge success for a regional theater production in a small Florida college town. The local critic, a professor at the university, gave the play a rave review. Her little brother waved the five-thousand-dollar check in the air when it was pre-

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sented to him on-stage and even glanced over in their direction and smiled. And he was very sincere in expressing his regret that the two of them would not be allowed to attend the cast party after opening night, but that was only for cast members, board members of the regional theater, and investors interested in a potential Broadway production.

He made it clear that it was not his decision. And he promised he'd come to her party. He actually seemed excited at the prospect of attending a nice little party at their house, which he had never seen. He looked forward to meeting a few of her close friends. Her girlfriend, Dawn. Bill, this nice young guy who worked twelve hours a day for her cleaning service so he could pay his daughter's medical bills. He couldn't wait to meet them.

The three days after his opening night were a blur of preparation. Nothing was going to be overlooked. He liked Manhattans, so all the ingredients for Manhattans were set up on a small bar, which to her looked elegant and very sophisticated. She only drank wine. Most of her friends drank beer. Her daughter didn't drink anything.

She had patterned the party after one described in *Martha Stewart's Living*. As she looked around the room at the stylish decorations, she was grateful for the magazine.

The votive candles in small paper bags lining the walk to their front door looked just like the magazine picture.

The phone rang.

Seconds later, her daughter appeared at the front door looking ashen and called out to her. She stopped lighting votive candles and looked up.

"He can't come. He's sick. He says thanks for everything. He's leaving early tomorrow. He has a ride to the airport. He'll call when he gets back to New York."

She looked down as if she was going to die. The nearest bag with its votive candle inside lit her face in a very sad way.

"I'd better call everybody and tell them not to come," the mother said in a flat voice, and ran into the house.

The daughter blew out the candles, gathered them up, and quickly crumpled the lunch bags.

Hours later, where they both sat, she finally spoke.

"Should we turn on some lights?" her daughter said. When she did, the party popped back into consciousness like a surprise from a dream. It *was* elegant and nice. Totally unused. Totally unseen.

"He always does this. Why do you even try?"

"He's my little brother. I taught him to tie his shoes. I was *there* for him. Nobody was there for me. You know what we should do? We should go bring him some soup or something to eat. At his

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hotel room. The Sand Dollar is a fun place. It's not that far. We'll heat up some Campbell's soup . . ."

"Let it go, Mom. He doesn't need any soup."

"I'll drive myself," she said, gathering up some things to take to her little brother. The Manhattan mixings, a bag of ice, some cookies for the plane, little canapés made with liverwurst and pickle relish. And some wine for herself, because they'd probably end up talking about old times, about their childhood and how well they had both done in life even though they hadn't been given much of a start. Even though it had been hell! Even though nobody had ever helped her.

She was half out the door when her daughter called out, "Hold up. I'll drive."

Once they were on the interstate, her mood was light and bubbly. That made her daughter happy, in spite of herself. Her mother's happiness was infectious, perhaps because it was so rare.

"Just don't get started talking about your mother and all of that. He doesn't want to get into all of that."

"Doesn't want to get into it? His plays are full of it."

"Yeah."

"He doesn't put me in any of his plays. But that's *art.* He has to change things around."

"If what he puts in his plays is what your childhood was like, it's nothing you want to talk about."

"He cleans it up. He makes it into entertainment. He makes it into *art.* This is the exit for the Sand Dollar."

"His room is number ten," her mother said as they walked along a cement second-story deck with their glass cargo clinking in strained plastic bags. "I guess it's right down there by the room where they're having a party."

Partygoers sat out on the wrought-iron railing, smoking, drinking. Some were laughing. Some nuzzling just outside the rectangle of light falling from the open hotel-room door.

The party was in room number ten.

The room was full of smoke and people. The daughter stood there in the doorway with her mother, staring, their bags pulling their hands down, rounding their shoulders like refugees.

The big hotel room was filled with laughter and people sitting on the beds and the floor. The mother recognized some of the people who had been in the play and the critic-professor whose picture she knew from the newspaper. She couldn't see her little brother anywhere.

"Come on, Mom, let's go."

She set her bags down with a clanking noise. One of the partygoers just reached in, took out an aluminum foil-wrapped plate of canapés, and unwrapped it.

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"Canapés!" he called out, and everybody clapped and cheered.

Her daughter pulled her out and shoved her along the cement passageway toward the steps, back into the dark, back to the parking lot and their car.

When they were halfway to the cement stairs, he called her name and she turned.

"I can explain all this," he said, coming toward them, breathless.

"Let's go, Mom."

"I didn't do anything wrong. These people just all dropped by. Come on in and meet everybody. Why did you come by and bring food if you didn't want to come on in?"

Her daughter pulled her away. He leaned over the iron railing and called to them. They were down a few stairs, around a landing, and down some more stairs, then out into the parking lot before he stopped calling her name in a bored, slightly irritated fashion.

At home, at three in the morning, her mother finally stopped crying. She sat there on the bed and stroked her mother's sweaty, exhausted hair.

"I've got to tell you something, Mom. I wasn't going to tell you ever, but you should know."

Her mother propped herself up on her elbow.

"What?"

"You've got to stop this. He never thinks about you. I don't care if you raised him almost all by yourself. He doesn't even like us. I kind of think he's even ashamed of us."

Her mother sniffled. "That can't be. He invited us to opening night. He smiled at us, in particular, when he was on the stage getting his money. He's my little brother. I fed him when *she* was passed out on the sofa. I did the grocery shopping from the time I was nine. You think most kids are doing grocery shopping when they're nine?"

"When I went up there to New York last Thanksgiving? He tried to have sex with me."

"No." Something went out of her mother's eyes.

"More than once. He kept saying he loved me and all of that."

Her mother laughed. "That's all in your imagination. He might have hugged you or something. He might have been putting you on, teasing you. He's a real tease. All the time, growing up, he teased me. He teased me about dates. He's a tease. He was kidding around, I'm sure of it."

"You weren't there, Mom. He wasn't teasing. That's why he's kinda cold to me . . . to us . . . because I wouldn't do anything with him."

"Great." Her mother stood up, wavering slightly before walking slowly toward the kitchen and the refrigerator.

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"I felt I had to tell you."

"Great," she yelled out from the dark hallway.

"He's not your little brother. He's nothing," she said quietly, too quietly for her mother to hear, regretting horribly that she had told her anything.

The daughter graduated from high school at the top of her class and got a scholarship to a college in Atlanta. Her mother increased the employees in her office-cleaning service from six to eleven. Every now and then the subject of her little brother came up, usually from seeing a segment on *Entertainment Tonight,* or one of the gossip shows when they showed a clip of him escorting a TV star to a Hollywood party, or at an opening, or he might be shown briefly just a few feet behind someone important. None of the openings were for his plays or movies anymore. His play that had been at the regional theater didn't make it to Broadway and there was no mention of another one in the works. There was a nasty gossip blurb on him in *People.* Nothing like the full three-page feature story of only a few years before. It made brief mention of a drug problem, or gambling addiction, or both. When the daughter showed it to her mother, her mother shook her head and said nothing.

In the fall, after a long day supervising her ever-increasing number of cleaning crews, as the sun set, she relaxed out on her new deck with a nice glass of wine and her first letter from her daughter away at college. She started to open the envelope and looked up and there he was standing in front of her.

"I got a rental at the airport." He found himself a glass from her kitchen and helped himself to some wine, then plopped into a chair right next to hers out on the deck. "You have nothing to say to your little brother?"

"I'll be damned," she said in a whisper.

He was not dressed in the same fashionable, in-style way. His nails were not manicured now. His haircut wasn't one of those perfect haircuts that politicians have. His shirt collar was too big and frayed and his eyes were red with bags. He looked like he had been crying or looking very hard for a long time at something he didn't want to see. He looked like what they had printed about him was true.

They didn't hug or anything. She surreptitiously slid the letter from her daughter under the cushion of her deck chair and they both looked out at her backyard as if it was interesting.

He wiped some sweat from his forehead. "I thought I'd never find it. These subdivisions are hell with all these cul-de-sacs. Have you moved? No. This is the same place, isn't it? It is."

"It's the same place. I fixed it up."

"Nice. Got yourself a little bird feeder and everything."

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"You've never been to my house before. That's why you couldn't find it."

"Do you want me to leave? I mean, here I am—your little brother, came all this way. You taught me to tie my shoes. You took care of me when she was passed out on the sofa and papa-dearest walked out and never looked back."

"What do you want?"

"Trust you to see it right away. Well, I need some money, to be honest. I'm in a bind with some people who don't understand anything but money. I need three thousand dollars cash right away. I wouldn't ask you, but . . ."

"How did you afford the plane and the rental car?"

"I used somebody's credit card. I'll pay it back. They don't even know. It's not like somebody's getting hurt. I'll pay it back."

"Get out. Take the car back to the airport and go back where you came from."

Although he was still staring out at her almost dark yard, and hadn't looked at her since he had sat down, he now looked terrified. "I'm your little brother. We went through the mill together. It was us. Only us. We stuck together. You raised me practically all by yourself."

"And did you try to seduce my daughter?"

He looked at her, for the first time, in the eyes. The twilight made them both look gray. He was incredulous. "So that's what you're mad about. I thought it was because I wouldn't come to your stupid party with your cleaning crew."

She looked straight ahead and gripped the cushion of her deck chair.

"What did she tell you? I got high, and I guess I teased her a little too much, and she took it all too seriously. But I never tried to *seduce* her. I never touched her! I swear! Nothing happened. Really! I mean, I've had nothing to do with her."

"Why should I lend you money?"

He looked crestfallen. "Well, maybe you shouldn't." He finished his wine with great finality and rose. "I guess you want to hear about me on the news some night. Dead at thirty-eight. I'm still enough of a celebrity to get a little mention when they finally kill me. And they *will* kill me. That's for real."

She went into the kitchen to get him something. The light in the kitchen after the dark outside hurt her eyes. She came back out squinting. "Here. Maybe this will help you." She held up her small, shiny Colt ladies' pistol, but he was gone. She heard a car door slam and an engine start.

Suddenly, she felt more alone than she had in her whole life. She called his name and ran to the front of the house. When she only saw his taillights, she ran inside and got her car keys.

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She had a fight with her daughter in her mind as she drove along the abandoned interstate looking for him. She could almost hear her daughter saying, "Let him go, Mom. Forget about him." She knew he'd be headed toward the airport.

As she passed one lone car in the eerie pink-gray light of the freeway, she looked over to see if it was him driving. It wasn't. Her looking unnerved the other driver, who pulled off at the next exit. She didn't know what kind of a car he was driving, where he was, or anything about him. She was alone on the freeway. She didn't know anything anymore. When she at last pulled alongside him and he looked over, he smirked and buzzed his window down.

She buzzed down her passenger window, and they tried to talk at sixty-five miles per hour, but they couldn't understand each other.

They were actually screaming out to each other when she raised her hand from the darkness of her front seat and shot him in the face. The shocked look on his face seemed to say, "But I'm your little brother!" Then his car went off the embankment down into the darkness of trees.

There were no other cars around, so she made a U-turn across the grass median and went home on the empty freeway, thinking maybe it hadn't really happened, maybe it was all a bad dream like her childhood.

It was a hot night filled with crickets. The following day was punctuated by the phone chirping at evenly spaced intervals.

When she finally answered, all she said was, "Oh no, my little brother."

She sat out on her deck for a long time. Just as the sun was setting, when she had stopped crying, she remembered her daughter's letter. She took it carefully out from beneath the cushion of the deck chair, pulled it open, and began to read.

It was not the first letter from college that she had hoped for. There were no accounts of her daughter's roommate, no complaints about classes. Essentially, there was nothing about school.

All it said was that she wanted to come home, over and over and over, that she missed her mother, missed taking care of her.

As almost an afterthought, she explained that what she had told her mother about the trip to New York was a lie. She made it up, she explained, because she couldn't bear to see her mother in so much pain over a brother who never thought twice about her.

She ended with, "I understand the need to be needed. Please let me come home."

Many hours later, in a pitch-black night inhabited only by desperate insects, she wondered what part of her life she was in. ●

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Art by Mark Evan Walker

The Woman in the Woods

by Malcolm Shuman

Contrary to popular perception, real archaeologists aren't supposed to dig for treasure, but how do you say no to an old lady who walks with a cane?

It was the summer of 1982 and I was running a crew for Sam MacGregor, who'd been contracted by a timber company to do an archaeological survey in the pine woods of Vernon Parish. That meant Sam stayed at the University in Baton Rouge, except for occasional trips to check our progress, and I, as his graduate student, was in charge of the field crew. They—the three others on the crew—and I moved from tract to tract, lining up four abreast on a ridge top and digging holes every hundred feet in the sandy soil. Lots of ups and downs, from hills to creek bottoms, in hundred-degree heat, and after a week or two you started to doubt your career choice. So I wasn't unhappy when the woman called

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the motel and said she wanted to talk to me.

She said, "Mr. Graham, I heard you were doing archaeology in the area and the mail carrier said you were staying at the motel. I have something I want you to see."

Ninety-nine times out of a hundred it's a collection of projectile points and sometimes it's a knoll that the landowner thinks is an Indian mound. But some of the best discoveries come from enthusiastic locals, so I told her I'd drive out the next day.

Her name was Delores Key and she gave me detailed directions because the house was in the woods fifteen miles from Leesville. From her voice I judged her to be elderly, and I hoped it wouldn't be a false alarm—just an old lady who wanted somebody to talk to.

Like his series sleuth Alan Graham, Malcolm Shuman is a contract archaeologist. After receiving a Ph.D. in anthropology from Tulane in 1974, he began to travel the world carrying out archaeological and anthropological work, especially in France and Mexico. He is the author of five mystery novels, all of which incorporate local legends and archaeology in the plots. He makes his home in Louisiana, the setting for his first mystery for us (which is also his first published short story).

The next morning I dropped off the crew at the survey area and drove north on Highway 171, past Peason Ridge, which the army uses for a target range, and then I went east on a little gravel track. In two minutes I was rising into the hills, with pine trees swaying on both sides of the road, and when I dipped down and saw the narrow wooden bridge below, I crossed my fingers and hoped it would hold the carryall.

The driveway to the house was at the top of the rise, with a mailbox on an unpainted post marking the place.

She was standing out front as I drove up, a petite, gray-haired woman of sixty or so leaning on a cane. The frame house behind her needed paint, a couple of boards had fallen askew, and a tarp covered what was probably a hole in the roof. A rusting Chevy Belair sat on blocks in the front yard and looked as if it hadn't been worked on for five or six years. I wondered who Mr. Key was, that he let his place go this way, but it wasn't my business. As I got out, a Catahoula hound, one of its eyes glass, wandered out to investigate, but the woman waved her cane at it and the dog slunk away.

"Thank you so much for coming," Delores Key said, and there was something about the way she pronounced her words, carefully and with no trace of drawl, that made me sense she was out of place here.

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She asked me in, and to my surprise I found the interior a complete contrast to the unkempt yard. The living room smelled of spices and the furniture, though sparse, was meticulously arranged, with a couch facing a polished coffee table with a vase of fresh wildflowers. An old full-cabinet television was in one corner. A wall of books with a worn encyclopedia set testified to somebody with curiosity about the world, and there was an open space between two of the volumes, as though someone had been reading and hadn't yet replaced the book that belonged there. I wondered for a second if the woman had cleaned up especially for me and then decided against it: No, this was a woman like my late grandmother, who had a cleaning routine, so that disorder was never a possibility.

She indicated a stuffed chair beside the coffee table.

"Please sit down, Mr. Graham. Would you like some iced tea?"

I accepted and she came back a few seconds later, first with a tray containing two glasses, and then with a tall pitcher.

"Will you be in this area long?" she asked.

I told her we'd be leaving as soon as we finished the survey, which was probably in another week or two. She nodded, her gray eyes studying me as if she were trying to make up her mind.

"Do you think you'll be coming back?" she asked finally.

"Who knows? Probably not anytime soon. When we finish this work we have to analyze the artifacts we've found and then school will start and . . ."

"Yes," she said. Then she told me she used to teach school, but that she'd had to retire when she'd injured her hip. She wasn't from Vernon Parish, she explained. She was from Farmerville, in the northern part of the state, and she'd ended up here because she'd met the late Mr. Key when he was a long-distance truck driver and she was just a young woman, teaching in the local school. His home was in Vernon Parish.

"So I came here," she said. "You do those things when you're young."

But Mr. Key was dead now and she was by herself.

I shifted in my seat. So she was lonely. Was that why I was here?

But she was already ahead of me.

"Mr. Graham, I called you because there's something on this property I think might interest you. Have you ever heard of Philip Nolan?"

I thought for a moment and then it came to me.

"You mean the Man Without a Country?"

She nodded, still smiling. "Not many people remember that story," she said. "Yes, that's the man. Except that the story by Edward Everett Hale has nothing to do with the real Philip Nolan, who was a lot more exciting than the fictitious man who

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was supposedly locked up on a ship and taken from port to port for the rest of his life and never allowed to hear anything about the United States."

I waited while she sipped her tea and then set the glass down carefully on the tray.

"The real Philip Nolan was quite different," she said. "He was an adventurer in the period from the end of the American Revolution until eighteen hundred. As you know, this area was claimed by Spain then, along with Texas and most of the American West, and the Spanish also owned what became the Louisiana Purchase territory, including New Orleans."

I nodded.

"In those days, there were all kinds of schemes by Americans to exploit the Spanish lands, because the Spanish control seemed so feeble. You've heard of General James Wilkinson? He was living in Kentucky at the time, but he was secretly scheming with the Spanish to sell Kentucky to Spain—with himself as the dictator of the new country, I'm sure."

"Not a very nice man, from what I've read."

"I'm afraid there are lots of not very nice men in this world, Mr. Graham." She gave a little sigh. "Anyway, Wilkinson sent Nolan to New Orleans to make a deal with the Spanish there to allow Nolan to go to Texas and buy horses and drive them back to Louisiana, because horses were in short supply then. This was fine with the Spanish in New Orleans but the Spanish in New Orleans and the Spanish in Texas weren't on such good terms."

"So Nolan was, in effect, smuggling the horses in," I said.

"As far as the Texas Spaniards were concerned. He made three forays into Texas and in the last one, in eighteen hundred, the Spaniards from Texas caught up with him. There was a fight. Nolan was killed and his men were captured."

"Luck of the draw," I said, wondering where she was heading.

"Yes. That's what Mr. Key always said. Though you don't remind me of him at all."

"Oh?"

"No matter." She got up slowly, leaning heavily on the cane, and went to the bookcase, where she removed a folder with some papers. She came back and took her seat on the sofa again. She removed a faded parish highway map and handed it to me.

"According to local lore, Philip Nolan crossed this parish on his way to Texas. The route is called Nolan's Trace. I've marked it on the map."

I looked down at the paper and saw a penciled line that wandered across the paper from one edge to the other.

"Of course, there's a great deal of dispute. Some say the route was to the north and didn't even go through the parish, and others

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put it a little to the south, but it seems likely he would have crossed the Sabine River at the place I've marked, because there used to be a ferry there. Of course, there was a trace there before Nolan came, and people used it after he was gone, but it's gotten his name because it was probably the route he used."

"You've done a lot of research," I said.

"Mr. Graham, it's the one thing, besides housework, that I have to do with my time since Mr. Key passed away and the children all grew up."

"But you said there was something you wanted me to see."

"Yes. But let me finish explaining."

I nodded. "Of course."

"That last trip, when Nolan was killed, he and his men were carrying a great deal of money to buy horses. When they were surrounded by Spanish troops, of course, the question was primarily survival. People scattered in all directions. Only Adam McClay managed to escape."

"Adam McClay?"

"The man with the money to pay for the horses."

Now I saw it all. We were talking buried treasure, only instead of the pirate Lafitte's gold, which is what is buried in every South Louisiana parish, or the West clan's loot, which you hear about in parts of North Louisiana, we were talking about treasure from an almost forgotten American adventurer of a hundred and eighty-two years before. But there was little I could do except hear her out.

"Now, when you look at the route I've drawn on the map, you can see that it passes about a mile north of here. But that's not likely, Mr. Graham. In fact, I think it's close to impossible."

"Why is that?"

"The creek is too deep. The only crossing for three miles in either direction is right down below this house. That's where I think the trace crossed, Mr. Graham."

"That's logical."

"When I first came here, Mr. Key's mother was still alive. She lived by herself in a house where this one was—we built this one after she passed away. Her home wasn't much more than a cabin, really. She was old and blind but she told wonderful stories. Mr. Key didn't care anything for them, but I used to listen for hours. I think it upset him that I took them seriously. He used to say they were all just nonsense, but I didn't think so. I thought there was truth in them if you could just figure out what it was."

I snuck a look at my watch. If this was going to be another goose chase, I needed to find a way to cut it off and get back to what Sam was paying me for.

"Old Mother Key used to say that where her house sat was

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known as Robber's Ridge, because this ridge was where an old inn used to be, where bandits used to stay. Or maybe it was because the innkeeper used to rob people: She wasn't sure about that part. Now, when I say inn, I mean just a crude log cabin where travelers threw a blanket on the ground or on a plank floor to sleep."

"I understand. But Mrs. Key—"

She held up a finger. "I'm getting to it. She said there was also a story that somewhere on the property was a huge oak tree named the Bandit's Oak and that it was under this tree that Philip Nolan's money was buried."

"Mrs. Key, there are a lot of stories about buried treasure . . ."

"I know, and you're right to be sceptical. And, after all, this is piney woods, with very few oak trees, except in the bottoms. There certainly isn't a big oak on this tract today."

"Then . . ."

She leaned forward, her expression intense. "I never could figure that out," she confided, "until the other day."

"Oh?"

"Mr. Graham, I found the tree."

"You found the tree?"

She managed a brittle little laugh. "No, I didn't go walking in the woods. I haven't been able to do that for years. But I didn't have to. The tree is not more than a hundred feet away."

She was getting up now and I followed her through the immaculate little kitchen, where the oven smelled of freshly baking bread and where the big carving board where the dough had been rolled was already in the sink. The wall rack of carving knives had each item in its place, and I knew that if I looked in the refrigerator everything would be fresh—no curdled milk, no softening tomatoes, no cheese grown hard from age. Delores Key opened the back door and I saw a bare yard that sloped toward the edge of the ridge. On the left was a chicken-wire fence and on the right an unsightly pyramid of Jax beer cans as tall as I was.

"I know," she said tersely. "It's unsightly. Mr. Key liked his dogs and his beer." She gave a little shrug. "Well, I still have one of the dogs, though in dog years he's probably older than I am."

"But I don't see a tree," I said, sensing her embarrassment.

"That's because it was cut down," she explained.

She limped toward the edge of the ridge, the hound sniffing at my heels as I followed. She halted just before the place where the terrain plunged downhill toward the bottoms. "Here," she said, jabbing with her cane, and I saw a few splinters of wood thrusting up from the surface. I bent over and swept away the sandy soil with one hand and felt something hard.

"It's a stump," she said. "Cut off level with the ground. We never

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saw it because it was covered up. But over the years, as the slope has eroded more and more, it finally uncovered a part of it."

I cleaned off more of the surface. "It's a big tree, all right."

"Big isn't the word for it. It's an oak. The Bandit's Oak. It was probably cut down by loggers."

"Funny your mother-in-law didn't know about that. She or her parents would have been alive during the logging boom in the eighteen nineties."

"Things get turned around, twisted in the telling. Nobody thought the tree was this close."

I straightened up. "Well, it may be you're right," I said.

But she wasn't going to let me get away that easily. She tapped the ground at a place between the tree and the stack of beer cans. "Right here is where it has to be. They wouldn't have buried it on the side that would erode away, but on this side, toward the house, the tree protects it."

"The treasure, you mean."

"Philip Nolan's money, yes."

"Well, it may be. If I had a metal detector . . ."

"There's another way," she said.

I was afraid she was going to suggest that.

She saw my reluctance and put a hand on my arm.

"I know it's a lot to ask. But what if it is here? What if it's buried just three or four feet under the ground? What if it's been here all these years?"

I didn't want to tell her I didn't have much patience for buried-treasure stories, that we could dig out here all week and I'd bet my graduate assistantship we wouldn't come up with anything more than a few nails and a couple of Lincoln pennies.

"It's sandy," she said. "Not like in the bottoms. It isn't that hard to dig. I would myself, but . . ."

So what could I say?

Two hours later I had a hole four feet deep and about as wide. I'd tried where she'd pointed and then expanded to the left, and then to the right, and then back, toward the house. She'd brought me frequent infusions of iced tea, and stood at the edge of the pit, eyes intent, as I came down through the upper layers and into the reddish, sandy clay subsurface. Each time she'd pointed and said, "Over there. Maybe just a little more," I complied, telling myself that I was making an old woman happy, and vowing I'd never say a word of this, lest I be laughed out of the graduate program. And, at her direction, I dutifully put all the back dirt on the slope's edge, where I wouldn't be covering up areas she might want me to dig next.

But there's a point where you say enough, and that point came

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at just before noon. I dropped the shovel, wiped my brow with a bandanna, and shook my head.

"Mrs. Key . . ."

She heaved a deep sigh.

"I was so certain," she said forlornly.

"I'm very sorry." I looked over at the pile of back dirt. "I'll fill it in."

But she shook her head. "You've done enough. My nephew will be by in a few days. I'll have him do it. He can put in some of those beer cans while he's at it." She turned around, as if not wanting to face her failure.

"We tried," I said, brushing off my clothes.

"We certainly did. Now it's time for some lunch. The least I can do is feed you. I have some chicken livers and—"

"Thanks. I have to get back to the crew."

I left her standing in the yard with the dog by her side, a lonely woman trying not to show that her dream had been shattered.

And no, for twenty years I never told anybody about Philip Nolan's treasure. But last month, a decade after I'd taken over the firm following Sam's retirement, we got another job in Vernon Parish, this time for a company laying a pipeline just north of Leesville, and I thought about the woman in the woods. As I drove west through the pine woods and across the bottom of Fort Polk, I wondered about Delores Key. Probably dead now, one more person who'd dreamed of striking it rich and died disappointed. Most such people I don't feel sorry for, because they want something for nothing, but Mrs. Key had seemed different: She was a prisoner whom the money might have freed. A sense of sadness settled over me and the next morning, after dropping the crew at the pipeline right of way, I drove up US 171, wondering if I'd remember the turn that led to the creek crossing.

I wouldn't stop, I told myself. I just wanted to see if the house was still there, and if it looked the same.

Amazingly, I found the turnoff, but the rickety bridge had long ago been replaced by a concrete span, and when I got to the top of the hill I found a new mailbox, painted black, with a red bow left on it from Christmas five months before.

At first I thought they'd torn down the old house, because the place looked larger than I remembered. Then I realized a room had been added. The ancient Chevy was gone, of course, and there was an Isuzu Trooper under a carport at the end of the drive. The carport was new, too, I realized, as were the flower beds. I edged my Blazer into the driveway. I'd just turn around: No sense bothering the people who lived here now. But as I reached for Reverse, I noticed a woman standing under the carport, watching me.

Mrs. Key had spoken of grown children: Maybe this was one of

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them. On an impulse, I cut off the engine, got out, and walked toward the woman.

She was early-thirties, wearing shorts and a T-shirt that showed she hadn't lost her figure. Brown hair hung to her shoulders, and around her neck was a small gold cross on a chain. For a minute I thought I'd found the local homecoming queen.

"I don't guess Mrs. Delores Key still lives here," I said.

The woman raised her hand to shade her eyes, as if she wanted to get a good look at whoever would ask such a stupid question.

"Mrs. Key died six or seven years ago," she said, and when she spoke I saw that one of her upper incisors was crooked. It gave her a human aspect and, oddly, added to her attractiveness. Then I noticed the slight bulge of her stomach and I realized she was pregnant.

"Did you know her?" she asked.

"I met her a long time ago," I said. "I just thought I'd stop and say hello."

"I'm sorry. We bought this place five years ago. We added the room and the carport last year. We needed more space, with the kids."

"Are you family?" I asked.

"Oh no. But Miss Delores did teach me when I was in high school."

"Really."

The woman nodded. "Everybody liked her. She really got into things."

"History?" I asked.

"Yes. When I was a freshman was her last year."

"Have you ever heard of Philip Nolan?" I asked her.

To my surprise she nodded. "Sure. That was our class play. Miss Delores was our adviser. It was called *The Death of Philip Nolan.* I don't think it was completely historical. I mean, there was this part where the governor's wife falls in love with Philip Nolan but he doesn't want her, you know. So she tells the Spanish where to find him and disguises herself as a soldier and when they surround him she runs up while everybody else is shooting and helps him get away on her horse, but when they get away from everything and he gets down, she stabs him. I played an Indian girl. Well, they say my great-grandmother was Choctaw."

"Do you know anything about Philip Nolan's Trace?" I asked slowly.

"The old road? They say it went north of here a couple of miles."

"Isn't the creek too deep for a crossing?"

"North of here? I don't think. The creek stays shallow for four or five miles through here. You can cross anyplace you want, so long as it isn't spring flood."

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I frowned. "Are you sure?"

"Sure as can be. Why?"

"No reason." I was thinking about that afternoon with the shovel. "Look, I know this sounds strange, but would you mind if I walked around to the back of your house?"

The woman gave a little shrug.

"Sure. What are you looking for?"

"I'm not certain."

I walked around the carport and stopped in the backyard. There was a stand-up swimming pool where the dog fence had been and a carpet of close-cropped grass led all the way to the edge of the ridge. I walked to the edge and looked over.

"We're going to put up a fence this summer," the woman said, and patted her belly self-consciously. "I don't want the baby to fall over."

"Ever been to the bottom?" I asked.

"Sure. Howard—that's my husband—killed a big moccasin down there the year we moved in. It was curled up in the old beer cans and trash the Keys had thrown down the hill."

I went to where the old oak stump had been and toed the ground. My toe struck something hard. It was still there.

"Where did Miss Delores die?" I asked finally. "Was it here or in a nursing home?"

"Neither one," the woman said. "She died in Paris, France, of all places."

"France?"

"That's right. She wouldn't turn loose of this house, no matter how hard it must've been for her living here alone, without a relative in the world. But even though she was almost eighty, it didn't keep her from taking one of those tours, you know, where they see everything in two weeks. I guess it was too much for her, because they found her dead in bed the day they were supposed to come back. I guess it was just too much for her poor old heart. But she died happy, everybody said."

I found myself staring at the place where I'd dug the hole.

"They say she put away some money on her teacher's retirement," the woman went on, "and she had some kind of insurance from her husband."

She followed me back around the carport toward my Blazer.

"She was a smart lady," the woman said. "You could tell from her classes."

I stopped, thinking. Why, I wondered, had she waited so long to take the trip?

"Tell me something," I said. "When did Mr. Key die?"

"Well . . ." The woman pursed her lips. "I don't think anybody knows."

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"What do you mean?"

"I mean, she had him declared dead, but it took seven or eight years."

"Declared dead? You mean . . . ?"

"He just disappeared one day about twenty years ago. It wasn't such a big surprise, though. He drank, used to go off for weeks at a time. That's what everybody said, anyway. Then he'd come back and lay into Miss Delores. He was a mean man, Mr. Fred Key. He even broke her hip once, poor woman."

"Broke her hip?"

"That's right. Tried to run over her, everybody said, but she wouldn't charge him. I think she was too scared."

I thought of the tiny woman with the cane. What had she said? *I'm afraid there are lots of not very nice men in this world, Mr. Graham.* Now I understood.

So Delores Key had lied about her husband. But maybe it was to protect her pride. Why expose all the dirty laundry to a stranger?

Do you think you'll be coming back? she'd asked.

"Why are you smiling?" the woman asked.

"I was just thinking."

"About what?"

"All those beer cans," I said. And all that dirt I moved because I was too young and obliging to hurt the feelings of a poor old lady who had known all along exactly what she was doing, and what she was having me do.

"What about the beer cans?"

"It wouldn't have taken much to shove them down the hill," I said. "They're aluminum."

"They didn't all go down the slope," she said then.

"No?"

"Howard was going to put the swimming pool on the other side of the yard. He was leveling the ground and he started finding beer cans. It looks like Fred Key put a whole bunch of 'em in a big hole."

"I think it was more likely his wife," I said. "She probably just pushed a pile of 'em over and they fell in. Then she covered them with pine needles."

"But she couldn't have dug a hole," the woman said.

"No," I said: She got some damn fool young archaeologist to do that, and when he'd done it, she told him her nephew would fill it up.

But hadn't I just been told Miss Delores didn't have a relative in the world?

I had to keep myself from laughing out loud.

Just put the dirt on the edge there, where you won't cover up

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some place you may have to dig. The edge—where the dirt would slough off downhill with little or no help from her . . .

I remembered the baking bread and the cutting board. There'd been a big cleaver lying beside it. And there'd been a whole rack of knives on the wall. I wondered which one she'd chosen.

Fred, come out here. I want to show you something in the yard. . . .

What the hell? What's the big hole for?

I knew. It was twenty years later, but I knew.

Just like in the play, I thought: The no-account Philip Nolan hadn't gotten away after all.

I opened the door of the Blazer and turned to the woman.

"Well, thanks for taking the time," I said. "Good luck with the baby."

She touched her belly again. "Thanks."

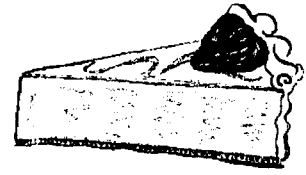
She put up her hand again to shade her eyes. "I was thinking, where those beer cans are, maybe we ought to dig 'em out and put in a real pool."

"Oh, I wouldn't dig down there," I said, closing my door. "I think the pool you have right now is fine." ●

Crime Bakery

by Brandy Rabin

The bookie buys a cookie,
One with lots of chocolate chips.
He's taking bets on numbers
And he'll even give you tips.



Embezzlers like the cheesecake;
They can shave off just a hair.
And burglars favor crumb buns—
They can break in anywhere!

Demolitionists like chocolate bombes;
They're crazy for the name.
And arsonists of course prefer
Plum pudding's bright blue flame.

The bosses all choose sticky buns.
It cuts down on the crumbs.
Enforcers go for sponge cake;
They can press it with their thumbs.

The men on wanted posters?
Why, they take a cake 'to go.'
And what brings all these people here?
They really like the dough!

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NEEDLECRAFT

by Donald Olson

You won't be surprised to learn that Jamestown, New York resident Donald Olson knows something about antique furniture and its restoration. This favorite hobby of his appears in many of his stories in some shape or form—this time by way of the upholsterer's needle. Like most of his stories for *EQMM*, "Needlecraft" is of the twist-in-the-tail variety. When he isn't spinning his own yarns, Mr. Olson teaches through the *Writer's Digest* school. ¶

Minnie had sensed another Faithless George crisis brewing the moment she stepped inside her friend's upstairs apartment in one of those big renovated houses on Chestnut Street. Laurette Moodie's face betrayed familiar signs of domestic stress: inflamed and swollen cheeks, brave but tight-lipped smile, drooping eyelids pink from weeping. Laurette was a big woman who wore her hair in an unstylish braided coronet, and beneath the drab "working smock" her matronly figure had long given up the struggle to resist middle age.

"Are you telling me George is welshing on the divorce settlement?" Minnie asked her friend.

"Well, that's what it amounts to." Laurette expressed her resentment with a rapier thrust of the foot-long buttoning needle with which she was finishing off one of the three back sections of an Empire sofa she was in the process of re-covering. "For my own protection, is the way he put it. He said he'll stop by tomorrow afternoon to see if I've come to my senses. Promises mean nothing to that two-faced little runt. That's been clear ever since he dumped me for that—that bimbo."

"But he gave you the Rudley cottage. How can he renege on that?"

"Small print, Mouse, that I didn't even read. You know the state I was in. Turns out George keeps a half-interest in the property and the right to buy me out if I don't make a go of the antique shop within two years. In other words, he's got me over a barrel and there's not a blessed darn thing I can do about it."

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Minnie tried to console her friend. "We always knew George had no scruples. How you could have put up with his abuse and roving eye all those years I'll never understand."

Laurette sniffed. "His roving eye I learned to tolerate. It was when other parts of him started roving . . ."

"You should have walked out long ago."

"It's the old, old story, Mouse. I was dependent on him. What could I do? I had no skills."

"Well, you have now."

Laurette thanked her for this with a smile. "I was always a whiz at needlecraft but I never dreamed I might make a living from it. Along with the upholstering and refinishing and using half the cottage as a shop, I'm sure I can make a go of it, if only to show George I'm not as helpless as he thinks I am. I'm sorry, Mouse. I've no right to blubber on your shoulder."

"My shoulders are broad."

Which, indeed, they were not. It was not only because her name was Minnie that she had acquired the nickname Mouse when she was but a girl. Standing in back of Laurette, she would have been invisible, and the soft gray eyes, gray-speckled hair, and natural pallor brought the word mousiness to mind. She and Laurette could not have been more different, and yet their friendship had endured. Minnie's widowhood and Laurette's estrangement from George had brought them even closer together.

Now Minnie sought to divert her friend's thoughts from beastly George and his treachery. "You're keeping busy, dear, that's good. What a lovely rose brocade."

"Better than the original horsehair, that's for sure."

When old Mr. Barclay had sold his lease to George and Laurette to move into a nursing home he'd left the Empire-Victorian sofa—that monstrosity, as George called it—behind. Now Laurette brightened with a budding connoisseur's delight as she regarded the piece. Or pieces, actually, as the three back sections, the curved rosewood and walnut top rail, and the gracefully shaped arms had been disassembled from the base, a rectangular wooden box which had held the springs.

"Knockdown furniture was not a modern invention," explained Laurette, who enjoyed showing off her newfound knowledge of antiques. "All these sections are screwed together, you see. Quite simple, really. The springs were shot. I'll replace them with thick foam rubber and cotton padding. I can see it now, in all its brocade majesty, as a focal point in the shop. You know, George hated this sofa, but he did say he felt like Ashley Wilkes when he stretched out on it, more often than not in a drunken stupor. Ashley Wilkes, indeed. More like Rhett Butler with an attitude."

"Good girl. Keep that sense of humor. Now I must dash. You

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need anything at the market?"

"No, thanks. I haven't much of an appetite these days. If things hadn't gone wrong I planned to learn to drive when I got to Rudley. Maybe pick up an old station wagon or something. Mouse, dear, what did I ever do to deserve this?"

Minnie fled before another outburst of tears ensued.

Laurette made no effort to tidy either herself or the room before George arrived late the following afternoon. Pointless, anyway, to clean up the living room before the sofa project was finished. She had covered the carpet with a big sheet of clear plastic and when George rang the bell she was on her knees threading a length of twine through the eye of the long, rigid buttoning needle.

"God Almighty," cried George, regarding the clutter with his twisted, big-toothed smile. "What's all this?"

George Moodie was a short, skinny, red-haired, red-nosed man with the bumptious, self-important manner of a man twice his size.

"No, George, I'm not breaking up housekeeping one piece at a time. I'm re-covering this 'monstrosity,' as you called it. To put in my shop, if you have the decency to keep your promise about the cottage."

George swept scraps of old burlap from a chair and sat down. "I'm not trying to give you a hard time, Laurette. Just protecting you from your own foolishness. You wouldn't get enough traffic in Rudley to support a lemonade stand."

"I wouldn't rely solely on local traffic. That's not how the antique business works. I've done my homework."

"And I've done mine," he retorted. "You make a hash out of this antique nonsense and I have the option to buy you out at the end of two years."

Laurette's plump cheeks reddened with outrage. "I suppose one of your shyster lawyers cooked that up. Or was it that woman's idea?"

"Her name is Cindy, as you very well know. She feels the cottage could be fixed up as a holiday retreat."

Laurette's mulish expression hardened. "I see. This notion popped into her little pea brain when you told her my plans for the cottage?"

George denied this, not too convincingly. "I told you I'm not here to argue. Cindy dropped me off on her way to her aerobics class. I told her I'd walk to the office and meet her at Giovanni's for dinner. I'd hoped to find you in a more reasonable frame of mind. You always were a stubborn bitch."

Laurette saw all her dreams evaporating. The shop, the cottage, sweet independence. What joy would there be in it if she had to worry constantly about the chance of losing all she'd worked for at

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the end of two years? It was grossly unfair.

"Please, George, don't do this to me," she pleaded.

"Goodbye, Laurette." He sprang up and moved toward the door. All this time, scarcely aware of doing so, Laurette had been gripping the long steel buttoning needle in her hand. Without forethought, as if some demon of despair had seized momentary control of her faculties, Laurette lunged forward and drove the needle deep into George's back.

Staring down at George's lifeless form, Laurette was swamped by panic as she realized the frightful enormity of what she'd done. What insane impulse had come over her? What in God's name was she to do now? With at least the presence of mind to first lock the door, she collapsed onto the chair George had vacated and fought to compose herself.

Calling the police was quite out of the question. What possible story could she invent to make them believe this had been a bizarre accident?

She was acutely aware of the loud ticking of the antique beehive clock on the mantel as she tried feebly to reach a decision, only now realizing clearly the utter hopelessness of the dilemma she'd created for herself, lumbered with a corpse and with no apparent means of removing it from the apartment. Even had she owned a car and could drive, the prospect would have been scarcely less daunting.

Inspiration arrived as her glance fell on the disassembled sofa, that coffinlike cavity where the discarded springs had been attached. An image crossed her mind: George sprawled idly on the sofa feeling "just like Ashley Wilkes."

Breathing more naturally now, Laurette forced herself to examine the situation with a cold logic, a sudden ruthless determination making her feel like Scarlett O'Hara with a Yankee intruder dead at her feet. George had been wrong. She could be practical when circumstances demanded. There was but one way she could dispose of the body, a way that would arouse no suspicion regardless of who witnessed its departure.

Squeamishly withdrawing the bloodied needle and wrapping George's body in plastic sheeting, Laurette hefted it clumsily into the space previously occupied by the springs. A snug fit. Somehow in death George appeared even smaller than in life.

After smothering the corpse in mothballs, wrinkling her nose at their pungent aroma, Laurette began step by step the reupholstering process, unrolling the cotton and stuffing it around and over the body, swaddling it in a thick white cocoon. Over this she applied a layer of thick foam rubber, building up the back and front to make a reasonably flat surface.

All this feverish activity dispelled the last waves of panic. She

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cut a length of unbleached muslin, stretched it over an additional layer of cotton, and tacked it to the frame, using only enough tacks to secure the material. No point in making extra work for herself when she removed the body at Rudley. Finally, she applied the rose brocade.

Laurette stepped back and admired her work. The result was not unpleasing. She then proceeded to re-cover the arm pieces and by the time this was done and the sofa reassembled she was too exhausted to tack on the final piece of brocade to the back. That could wait till morning. The needle she sterilized before whipping out the vacuum cleaner and tidying the room.

She felt a grim but wickedly pleasurable satisfaction in a job well done as she gingerly perched on the edge of the sofa. Squishy, but firm enough, it would pass a cursory inspection.

To all appearances, George had vanished.

Minnie was more critical. "You did a super job, dear, but isn't the seat maybe a trifle lumpish?"

"You're right. That's why I didn't button it. I'll redo the seat when the sofa's been hauled down to Rudley." No problem there, she knew. Plenty of spots in the secluded garden where she could bury George's body. Eventually, the mystery of George's disappearance would evaporate in clouds of speculation.

"I thought that mean old man would die before he'd do the right thing about the cottage," Minnie said.

Laurette couldn't help herself. She said, with a straight face, "I needled him until he gave in."

She said that the haulers were coming on Friday, finding it extraordinary how murder could stimulate thought processes grown sluggish from apathy and despair. "I'm hoping you'll follow them down to Rudley while I clean up here," Laurette said as she brewed them a pot of tea.

"No grass growing under your feet," declared Minnie with a little tinkle of laughter.

"You bet your sweet life there isn't." The sooner grass was growing over George's the sooner she could begin to relax.

Cindy had called when George hadn't shown up at the restaurant where they'd arranged to meet. Precisely at what time had he left Laurette's? Laurette had exuded sweet concern, relishing the anxiety in the little homewrecker's voice, an anxiety she herself had consciously aped when the police had questioned her.

"I don't understand, Officers. George wasn't here more than ten minutes before leaving for the restaurant."

"Where he never arrived. Would you mind if we looked around your apartment, Mrs. Moodie? Routine check."

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"Be my guest."

Laurette settled back on the sofa, loving the textured richness of brocade under her stroking fingers.

Minnie came in shortly after the haulers arrived on Friday. "No news about George?"

"Not that I've been informed of. You want my opinion, he's done a bunk. Had quite enough of Miss Cindy Simpleton . . . Oh, do be careful, young man. The carving on that top rail is quite delicate."

The two husky truckers had carried the sofa only as far as the door when a problem arose."

"Ain't gonna fit through," one of them grunted.

The other cocked his head to one side. "Put your thinkin' cap on, Bert. What came in has to go out."

Various ideas were advanced, attempted, failed. The one called Bert glared at Laurette. "Lady, how in hell did you get this monster in here?"

Panic followed dismay as something came to Laurette's mind. "It was here when we moved in. I remember now. The former tenant, Mr. Barclay, said something about a pair of pocket doors into the hall having been removed. A single door was installed to replace them. Maybe if you took the door off?"

"Lady, you'll have to tear that whole frame out before that bugger'll go through. We ain't carpenters, y' know."

Laurette rubbed her hands together in frustration. "Then what do we do?"

The trucker shrugged. "Your problem now, lady."

They left after being paid for their time. Minnie seemed a bit put out that the trip to Rudley must be postponed. She said it was a pity Laurette hadn't measured the door.

"My mind was on other things."

"Then it looks like you'll have to take it apart again."

"Well, I don't know. It's a lot of work. I'll have to think about it."

When she was alone Laurette was faced once more with the apparent defeat of all her ambitious plans. It had seemed like such a brilliant idea, the perfect answer. To think she had fooled the cops, fooled everyone, and was now stuck with a corpse on her hands. She knew nothing about the physics of decomposition but didn't need a textbook to tell her it would be unwise to leave a dead person in an upper apartment for more than a short period in midsummer.

Run away? Out of the question.

Confess? Never could she muster the kind of courage to do that. To do so would be to invite the most unthinkable of consequences. Various solutions to the problem were rapidly discarded. A trunk seemed a possibility but this presented logistical, if not gruesome, problems. George, intact, would not fit in a trunk.

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In the end she knew there was but one answer. Scanning the pages of the *Pennysaver,* she chose an ad for a retired carpenter and made the call. It all depended on how quickly he could do the job. Laura assumed that in a dangerously short time a much less agreeable smell than the stench of mothballs would be emanating from the sofa.

Mr. Pitch, a garrulous, fit-looking man in his sixties, assured Laurette he could handle the job.

"But why do you want the door opening widened?" he asked.

Laurette explained frankly what the problem was, which, she was happy to learn, was no problem at all. At her insistence upon the job being done at once, Mr. Pitch left to fetch his tools from his van and proceeded to remove a section of the doorframe.

"No rush about replacing the casing," said Laurette. "Tomorrow or any time would be fine. The haulers will be coming this afternoon if I can reach them. All that's necessary is that they're able to get the sofa through the door."

Minnie, who showed up shortly after the carpenter had left, found Laurette in a more cheerful mood. "But why did you go to the expense, dear? Why not simply have taken the sofa apart?"

"This was easier, Mouse, and Mr. Pitch was very reasonable."

Minnie put the kettle on for tea while Laurette called a few haulers—not the ones who had come before—until she reached an outfit called Budget Hauling who promised to come first thing in the morning.

"I'm sure you'll be glad to get out of here," said Minnie, wrinkling her nose. "I never noticed that sort of musty smell before."

"I know. I can't wait to get to Rudley. All that sweet country air."

The haulers might have been twins of the pair who'd come before—young, husky, and eager to please. They admired the piece of furniture they'd come to move.

"You say you're opening an antique shop?" said the brighter looking of the two. "I got connections in the trade. I can put you on to a dealer who'd give you a pretty penny for this beauty. Hauls stuff like this to Texas every couple of weeks. Victorian's still very hot down there."

"What would he call a pretty penny?" Minnie wanted to know.

"I wouldn't take a penny less than eight hundred," said Laurette.

Minnie gasped. "Really, Laurette? You think it's worth that much?"

Laurette scoffed at Minnie's astonishment. "I'm sure he'd get over a thousand for it down there."

Through all the recent upsets, Laurette had found little Minnie's help and moral support invaluable. The two women hovered nervously as the haulers, puffing and grunting, lifted the sofa and maneuvered it through the doorway, with room to spare now, and down the stairs. Laurette trailed after them, biting her lips as

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they hefted it into the truck. She rather wished she were the one to follow them to Rudley but knew she could rely on Minnie to keep an eye on them as they unloaded it.

She tried not to think of the task ahead of her, exhuming George from his rose-brocade coffin, digging a final resting place for him in the patch of garden behind the cottage. To her mind, the worst of the experience was behind her. She felt liberated and ready to face the future with the highest of hopes.

"Now you know what to do," she instructed Minnie, handing her the keys to the cottage. "I'll pack up here and be ready to go when you get back. Oh, Mouse, isn't it thrilling? Maybe we could be partners in the shop. Would you like that?"

Minnie beamed. "My dear, I'd like nothing better. You know how time drags for me."

As if the drive to Rudley and back had tired her out, Minnie seemed in a far less buoyant mood and had a preoccupied air that Laurette was quick to notice.

"Everything went all right, Mouse? No hitches?"

With that same air of irresolution Minnie's gaze wandered around the apartment. "Oh no, everything went fine, only I'm afraid you might be mad at me."

"Why should I be mad at you? You've been an angel, helping me like this."

"Well, you see, dear, it's about the sofa. Those two nice young men hadn't been gone more than fifteen minutes when a big truck pulled up in front of the cottage. The words 'Recycling America' were printed on the side. You remember they said they knew an antique dealer who bought Victorian furniture to haul south? Well, they must have lost no time in spreading the word. Laurette, he was there about the sofa. I could hardly believe it. He gave it only the briefest of examinations and immediately made an offer. Nine hundred dollars! A hundred more than you said you'd sell it for. Tell me you're not mad, Laurette. I know I should have talked to you first, but I figured you'd want to strike while the iron was hot. I have his check in my bag. . . . Laurette? Is anything wrong?"

Laurette made a choking sound and had trouble recovering her breath. Finally she gasped, "Gone? You mean the sofa's gone?"

"Yes. The dealer and his helper whisked it straight into their truck. They already had almost a full load. Right now it's on its way to an auction house in Dallas. Laurette? Tell me I did the right thing. You look so queer."

Laurette managed a shaky smile. "Yes, dear, you did fine." Her expression might have been that of a martyr about to die for a lost cause. "Dallas. Isn't that funny? George always wanted to visit Texas." ●

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Art by Allen Davis

M. LE MÉDECIN'S WIVES

by Judith Cutler

Madame Fleurie cast an experienced eye about the room. The windows were open just wide enough to admit the spring breeze, carrying from the orchard a faint scent of apple blossom. The fine toile curtains ebbed and flowed, but not enough to displace any of the ornaments on the newly polished dressing table. She peered at the mahogany: No, it wasn't offensively shiny. The deep gloss certainly didn't suggest that the furniture was straight from the showroom. Instead, it told of generation upon generation of loving women's hands cherishing it with beeswax. The lace of the mats had the same sort of story: hands no longer young, their joints already starting to swell, toiling to produce a fairy fineness now preserved with the finest starch. She'd whisked away the photographs: Imagine M. le Médecin—usually so tactful—leaving portraits of his previous wives on the mantelpiece! Things should be done better than that, even in St. Martin les Clos, a village so tiny that M. le Médecin had declared that Bismarck's Prussian hordes could have marched through it without even noticing its existence.

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Of course, M. le Médecin's bride shouldn't expect everything. Presumably her family had made that clear: Although M. Colignac was a fine man, well respected throughout the district, he was no longer the Adonis a girl still in her teens might hope for. But they should also have told her that an older man would have knowledge to make her introduction to married life altogether more pleasurable. Certainly there had been no complaints from the first two Madame Colignacs, no desperate whispered hints as they had given the housekeeper her daily orders. None at all. Madame Fleurie had prided herself on making friends with her employer's wives, becoming their confidante. After all, she had been in the household for more than twenty years now, coming as a girl not much younger than this new Madame Colignac to be maid of all work. She had laboured so assiduously that when the old housekeeper had unexpectedly passed away one hot summer's day—if only she had listened to M. Colignac's warnings against lacing so tightly—she had, despite her youth, been promoted immediately.

Madame Fleurie pushed the window slightly wider: Was that M. Colignac's trap in the distance?

There'd been gossip in the village, of course. There always was when someone excelled, whether it was as a poet—the old tabbies had a field day when young Georges sent his father, the mayor, no less, his first slender volume, printed by a real Paris publisher—or as a domestic servant. Young Marie-Claude Fleurie, they whispered behind their hands after Mass, should have been at least twelve years older before she achieved such a position. Nonetheless, her sober deportment and evident skill eventually earned her the honorary title of Madame. So Madame Fleurie took her place as an acknowledged worthy of the village, however much a woman still the good side of forty might rue being treated as a matron of sixty. Some of the younger people might even have thought she was genuinely a decent widow, so respectable had she become.

Respectable, but still comely. When she looked at herself in the mirror on the armoire door, Marie-Claude could still smile with pleasure. Her skin was warm and soft, her cheeks rounded, and

Judith Cutler, like one of her series heroines, Sophie Rivers, is a university teacher in Birmingham, England. She has enjoyed success with both Rivers, "the most popular [type of] character in crime fiction at the moment" (says the *Evening Standard*), and her Kate Power police novels, which have been described by the *London Times* as "imaginative and dashingly plotted." A hallmark of Ms. Cutler's work is the strong female detective. See *Power on Her Own* (St. Martin's; 7/03). ✝

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her neck and bosom as attractive as a bride's. From time to time, a housewife in the *boulangerie* would ask her the secret; she was sure that in the cafe the men would speculate more coarsely. But she maintained her serene discretion, never embarrassing the new curé at her weekly confession.

What would this new bride be like? Before, M. Colignac had shown her photographs and read aloud to her extracts from his intended's letters. He'd been very reticent about this one.

There was a slight smear on the glass. She tutted. That would never do. She rubbed it away, and then flung open the door. This afternoon she would fill the space with the new mistress's trousseau. She hoped it wouldn't be too vulgar. All too often the new bourgeoisie had more money than taste. Still, it was none of her business, any more than the impressive sum they'd settled on their daughter. Honorine. Madame Fleurie savoured the name. She hoped she would make the groom happy. She adjusted a lavender bag, closing the door.

As for M. le Médecin, her kind M. Colignac, so long as she maintained an unswerving supply of delicacies to suit his appetite, he made no complaint. From time to time, over a shared *digestif,* he might ask her whether she had any regrets—but that was M. Colignac for you, always gentle and considerate. He had insisted on furnishing her bedroom in style and comfort. True, the sitting room where she received guests was at the far end of the spectrum, severe, almost Spartan. But that was what was appropriate for a woman of her station, and no amount of cajoling would make her agree to anything else, any more than she would dream of forsaking black bombazine for her working day.

The trap! Yes, that was definitely the good doctor's pony, its pace picking up now it saw its stable in sight. Madame Fleurie gave one final check: No, nothing wrong with her or her handiwork.

"But other wives! I heard that Monsieur was a widower, but *two* other wives!"

The child—she was little more—gripped Marie-Claude's hand in terror as the older woman unlaced her.

"Madame, this is no cause for terror. He's no Bluebeard, with a corpse behind each door. Come and see." Gently she threw a wrap around the girl, then led her a tour of the upper rooms. "See? Nothing except some old cases and some books your husband should have thrown out years ago. But that's men for you."

Honorine managed a smile. It didn't brighten a bovine face.

"Now, most brides don't spend their wedding night exploring attics. Come back to your room—and let me brush your hair, Honorine." Madame Fleurie seemed to use the first name almost despite herself, as if reluctant to suggest anything other than the

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most formal relationship. "What a pity your family didn't send your maid with you."

"But Madame, Monsieur—my husband—" the poor child flushed red as liver—"said that she wasn't suitable for a married lady. He said you would find someone. Here, in this village."

Madame Fleurie allowed herself a tiny moue. "Oh, these men! If only he'd asked me first! No, Madame, I regret that I can think of no one at the moment—not of a suitable age and education. But I'm sure that Monsieur your husband won't want you to be lonely—ask him if he will send for your own maid."

Honorine pulled a face, wrinkling a wide-nostrilled nose. She gestured round the room. "I think my Celestine would find this a little—a little . . ."

"Well, next time I go to market up in Carcassonne, I will enquire there. We will find you one, *ma petite.* In the meantime, let me help you into your nightgown. Your groom will be waiting." She smiled kindly.

Honorine clutched her hand, tightly, like a child on its first day in school. Her nails were bitten to the quick. "Will he—? And does it—?"

"Dear Madame, I told you. Monsieur Colignac is the kindest of gentlemen. I am sure he will do nothing to cause you the slightest grief. He will be just as much the gentleman as if it were myself between those sheets."

As the summer blossomed and grew hot, the villagers doffed their caps to the new Madame Colignac driving her pretty governess cart around the village. Some days, she tried, less effectively, to persuade the safe old mare that the doctor had picked out for her to tackle the meadows and vineyard slopes. Madame Fleurie continued with her work, providing, amongst other things, a fine dinner for the patients Monsieur thought worth cultivating. She graciously let it be thought that the young bride had drawn up the menu and perhaps even podded peas with her own white hands. The event was such a success that the doctor suggested expanding their circle—provided that his darling Honorine could contrive to talk more and giggle less. Perhaps, he continued, folding his breakfast napkin and dusting a few croissant crumbs from his lap, Madame Fleurie would be kind enough to give the silly girl a hint about cutlery, so that she would not let him down in future.

Madame Fleurie's fine eyes flashed with anger. "M. le Médecin, how dare you embarrass the poor girl like this! All those courses—are you surprised she used the wrong knife for the dessert? And her very first dinner party! You should be ashamed of yourself, sir." She put her arms round the shoulders of the weeping Honorine and led her to her boudoir. What was the man up to this time?

Henceforth, Madame Fleurie made a point of having Honorine

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at her side as she went about her household business or went down to the village. With gentle conversation, perhaps she could sugar the pill of quite necessary education. She spoke about how to greet whom: when to curtsey, and when to expect a curtsey. One day she took her to the little graveyard, carrying a bunch of everlasting flowers. Genuflecting before the huge granite tomb, with due ceremony she removed the glass dome from the flowers' predecessors, and replaced each old stem with a new one. Then, the dome back in place, she said her rosary, crossed herself, and prepared to depart.

"Unless you would like to say a prayer for the first Madame Colignac?" she suggested off-hand. "Little Isabelle—a sweet young woman."

Honorine blushed to her hair. "Why didn't you tell me?" she whispered.

Ah! So, as she'd suspected, the young mistress couldn't read. This was a new trick of the doctor's, marrying an illiterate child. What would his next move be?

"Tomorrow, if it's fine, we'll do the same for the second Madame Colignac. She's just here." She pointed to another grave, this one in raspberry marble. For some reason, Monsieur had chosen to keep his ladies separate. She deemed it too soon to mention the third Madame Colignac, the far side of the second. If the family—or even Monsieur himself—had preferred the smaller official number, it was not for her to disabuse the child. Not yet. In any case, she reasoned, so many men had a succession of young wives, M. le Médecin wasn't any different: A swift glance at the other graves would prove the terrible number of deaths in childbirth.

By midsummer, neither of the Colignacs had mentioned the need for a lady's maid. Well, he certainly wouldn't, always feigning a bluff ignorance of the ways of fashion and the needs thus caused. And the child was too terrified.

No, not by sex. Madame had had no evidence that the child was anything other than still a virgin. M. le Médecin was behaving towards her with utmost consideration. In some ways, at least. He knew what he'd get if he tried to treat Madame Fleurie like that.

Mistress and maid were on their way to the graveyard with another posy of everlasting flowers when Madame Fleurie became aware of Honorine fidgeting more than usual—no wonder she irritated the doctor. She was just like an infant needing to relieve itself.

"Yes, my dear—what is it?" she asked kindly.

"What—oh, Madame Fleurie! What did . . . the first Madame Colignac . . . die of?"

"Oh, poor lamb: Has that been worrying you all this time? Natural causes, my love. She had a bad heart, it seems. Just as the baby was stirring within her, alas, poor Isabelle, she had an attack and—well, there she lies. The second death—oh, that too was so

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sad. Just as Monsieur hoped to become a father, when his wife was deep into her labour, it became apparent that the baby was too big. They attempted to operate." Madame Fleurie crossed herself. "God rest her. And the baby. It would have been the son Monsieur so deeply longs for," she added, in heart-swollen tones. Was now the time to mention poor little Mathilde? Perhaps not.

Thinking, no doubt, of his young bride's health, or perhaps because he wished to widen the girl's horizons in the most literal sense, M. Colignac insisted that they make the most of any fine autumn days. Their walks or trips in the little cart took them further and further afield. Sometimes Madame Fleurie claimed that her feet hurt her, and borrowed a neighbour's pony so that she could accompany Honorine on her mare. This way they could scale passes and tracks unfit for human foot. They saw snow on the higher ranges. They must take care not to be caught in a storm even at this level, Madame insisted: Honorine was too precious to her new husband to take any risks.

Honorine reigned in her mare. "Precious!" she sobbed. "Precious! When he does that to me!"

"Does what, *ma petite?*" Madame Fleurie was genuinely curious.

"Shows me—those, those pictures!"

"Which pictures?" This was indeed new. What did the man think he was doing? Scaring a child with saucy photographs was not appropriate. In fact, the whole pattern of the marriage was beginning to worry her.

"Pictures of people's insides! Their hearts and lungs and intestines."

Madame Fleurie stared straight ahead. "Why did he do that, *ma petite?*"

"I don't know. They're so horrid. I don't want to see any more! Not never."

" 'Not ever' or 'never,' " Madame Fleurie corrected her idly. "I expect the good doctor wanted you to see what sort of work he did. So when he says that M. Quelqu'un has appendicitis, you know why it's so serious. Did he," she continued, "show you any other pictures? Of the outside of people's bodies, perhaps?"

Honorine shuddered. "Oh! He tried to show me some of a man with legs like an elephant's but I was so sick."

"Sick?" Could the child be *enceinte* after all? She must contrive a long talk with M. Colignac this very night.

Madame Fleurie knew exactly the moment to make requests. She always had. But tonight—as often, these days—the doctor had fallen into an exhausted sleep, his breath coming in irregular gasps. She buttoned back a sudden flood of questions springing

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unbidden to her lips—imagine, a woman of her discretion wanting to nag. *Does she suspect us? Doesn't she wake? What do you say if she asks where you've been?*

She had understood the other marriages—or thought she had. What man wouldn't want both a beautiful young wife to provide an heir, while enjoying whenever he wanted the body—and the mind, it had to be said—of his mistress? She was sure his delight in Isabelle had been genuine. But though he'd mourned her, in private as sincerely as in public, he'd not seemed surprised. It was almost as if he'd expected it. In the darkness, shifting slightly under his weight, she rebuked herself. Of course he must have realised—he was a doctor, after all!—that his little wife's pulse rate was irregular. Just as, come to think of it—and this time she could not suppress the thought—he must have known that Emilie's hips were narrow, and that she'd have trouble delivering a big baby. Why hadn't he intervened before? Why had he let her get so fat in her pregnancy? As for the third wife, encouraging her with her fad for collecting wild berries and fungi was one thing; letting her cook and eat them quite another.

Their own relationship had continued unshaken during those traumatic days. Indirectly, M. Colignac would always consult her about the next wife. He'd said, come to think of it, very little about poor Honorine. Very little except that she had an impressive dowry. Well, all the brides had come well endowed. But you'd expect a man with expensive tastes to want a rich wife. She fingered the satin sheets: She herself must have cost him a pretty penny over the years.

Why Honorine? And what was he doing with her?

She must give it some serious thought.

Madame Fleurie tapped him lightly on the shoulder—it was time for him to return to his own bed.

However closely she questioned Honorine, she could get no closer to the answer. It seemed that the poor girl was aware that her marital bed was often cold and empty; it seemed she had once or twice asked her husband where he went. But she had accepted his plausible explanation that of course he rose at night—was he not a doctor, with patients sometimes inconsiderate enough to be ill outside daylight hours? And did he not have to prepare for difficult cases by reading in his study? Why, he'd shown her some of his books—but she had been frightened by them. Did he want to alarm his charming young bride by telling her that some villager's TB was making him cough blood? Well, then, no more silly questions. She mustn't disturb her beauty sleep with silly worries.

Madame was still sure that Honorine had not been troubled in any other way: She was certainly not pregnant. Her monthly cycle

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was irregular, that was all. But she was certainly unhappy. She'd taken the news of the third wife's death as a personal affront, even though her husband had made it quite plain that anyone having similar truck with apparently innocent berries without his advice was foolish beyond belief. She'd been unsettled by the news that her mare wasn't well: Although she'd become quite a decent horsewoman, she was terrified by the prospect of the new mount her husband was insisting on. In short, Madame realised, she saw M. Colignac less as a red-blooded lover than as a dictatorial father.

Which wasn't the M. Colignac she'd known for so many years. It was almost as if he were trying to make his wife unhappy.

The others had been ecstatic in the early days of their marriages—sometimes she'd even feared for her own future. But M. Colignac had always discussed their faults with her quite dispassionately, as if they were presenting irritating symptoms of a disease he couldn't identify. Perhaps grieving for unborn children, he was more irascible in his third union: Had anyone taunted her thus, Madame Fleurie might have been tempted to eat foolishly to prove herself right.

And now Honorine.

She came to the first decision without hesitation. Honorine must leave the house. She must be sent on a long visit to her family. She had to work out the hows and whys and even the whens. But the . . . little holiday—yes, it must be soon. And then, using all her wiles, she must worm M. Colignac's reasons from his reticent breast.

In the event, despatching Honorine was easier than she'd expected. M. le Médecin had been called away to a long and difficult labour. She seized the portmanteau she'd had packed for days now, summoned the carrier, and, reading from a much folded scrap of paper, informed the unquestioning Honorine that her parents wanted her to visit them. And she was to go that very hour. Honorine might now be able to read a few letters of clear print: She certainly couldn't decipher ill-formed handwriting. So she set off in great glee, not even sending a tender message to her husband. The kitchen fire consumed the paper as soon as she'd gone. No, M. Colignac had to believe the story, so far as he was able.

Her finest cooking, his finest wine: He was hers for the plucking.

"What was your plan for Honorine?" she demanded, her hand telling him that though the question might be hostile, she certainly wasn't.

He snorted. "Why worry about that idiot?"

"Because she is still—lawfully—your wife. Though I have no doubt one or the other of you could seek an annulment. Come, Philippe, you have been determined to make her life here a misery. You must have a reason. Come, tell your little Marie-Claude what you've been doing."

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At a disadvantage, he stared.

"You chose a girl with a bad heart, so bad that even pregnancy killed her. You fed a second like a Strasbourg goose so she couldn't deliver the baby. A third feasted on honeysuckle berries. Come, Philippe—what did you have in mind for her?"

"Later, later!"

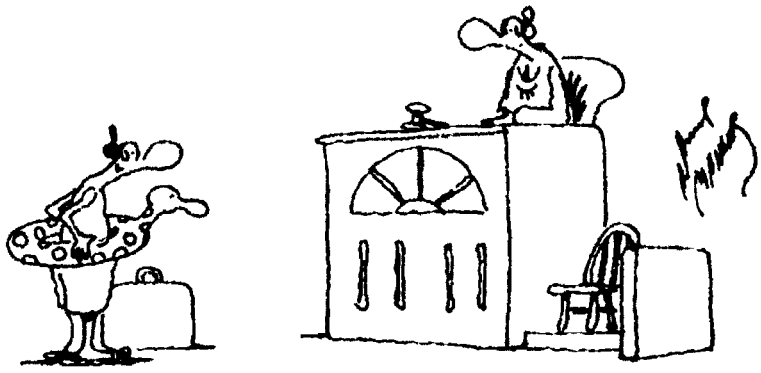
She whispered a promise. His eyes brightened.

"If you must know, I wanted to see if one could scare someone to death."

"The medical pictures or the new horse? Or a dinner party for the mayor? Oh, no matter. She's gone now, *chéri.* And I don't suppose she'll come back." She laid her hand on his wrist. "But I don't think you need any more wives, *mon vieux."* Not if the pulse was often as irregular as this. Well, there'd be a certain irony if he succumbed to the same complaint as his very first bride. Perhaps if she made his food richer and richer—yes, there was far more of Monsieur's body these days. Failing that—well, there were always wild berries with which to make a soothing tisane.

She led him gently upstairs.

But she'd take none of those measures till she'd made sure his lawyer had made certain vital changes to his will. It would, she reasoned, be nice to avenge the deaths of all those poor girls by making sure not a man, but a woman, a sympathetic, kind woman, benefited at last. ●



"Permission to approach the beach, Your Honor."

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LEOPOLD KIDNAPPED

by Edward D. Hoch

"That man Drexel called again," Molly told Leopold as he came in from his afternoon walk. It was one of those early May days when the air is alive with the promise of summer. "What does he want?"

"Something about his daughter's death last year. I told him I'm retired and he should contact Fletcher but he keeps calling me. Just ignore him."

They were going out that night, to a Tuesday-night pops concert downtown. Molly liked to attend them and, in truth, Leopold had come to enjoy them, too. Their circle of friends was diminishing and except for occasional dinners with Fletcher and his wife or Molly's lawyer friends, they were home much of the time. Age was beginning to tell on Leopold, and he usually let Molly do the driving after dark. That was why, at the end of an enjoyable concert, she told him to wait in front of the theater while she went for the car.

He'd been standing there just a few minutes, in the midst of the departing crowd, when a black sports utility vehicle pulled up to the curb. "Captain Leopold!" a woman's voice called out.

He squinted into the darkened vehicle, trying to make out the woman's face. "Do I know you?"

"It's Marilyn. Can I give you a ride?"

Leopold couldn't remember any Marilyn he knew well. The passenger door opened temptingly and he stepped a bit closer. That was when strong hands suddenly hustled him from the rear, forcing him into the vehicle. "What is this?"

"Don't worry," the woman behind the wheel said. "You won't be hurt."

The Leopold stories constitute one of Edward D. Hoch's most numerous series. The police captain first appeared as a subsidiary character in a 1957 tale, but went on to become a regular in Mr. Hoch's several rotating series for *EQMM*. It can't be said that Leopold has aged in real time, but unlike the series characters of many other authors, he has progressed through the normal stages of life and now has to be brought out of retirement to solve a case.

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The man who'd pushed him quickly got into the backseat behind him. Marilyn put the car in gear and started forward. "My wife!" he gasped, thinking of Molly.

"She's been told you were called away suddenly for an important meeting."

Leopold's mind was working overtime, certain that he was being kidnapped by some ex-convict he'd sent to prison decades earlier. He supposed they meant to kill him, but he took comfort in the fact that he was still alive. Apparently they wanted to talk to him first. He tried to say something, but the man in the seat behind him said, "Keep quiet." The SUV drove on through the darkness. He could make out little of the woman driver, except that she was young, with perfectly straight brown hair and an intent expression.

He knew they were driving south, toward Long Island Sound, though before they reached the water itself Marilyn turned off to the left, down a narrow lane lined with tall evergreens. It might have been the entrance to an estate, and he tried to remember some of the city's wealthier families at this end of the county.

Presently the car stopped and the man in the backseat guided him out. "This way," he said. Again he offered the assurance, "You won't be hurt."

Leopold was led in a side door and the car pulled away. They went up a few steps into a hallway with a polished wood floor. "Would you tell me where I am?" he asked the man.

"You are a guest of Mr. Arthur Drexel."

Leopold nodded. "I believe he's phoned me a few times."

"In here."

The man directed him to a book-lined study and seated him in a leather armchair opposite a large cluttered desk. Then he withdrew, leaving Leopold to await his host's arrival. It didn't take long. Arthur Drexel was a tall, white-haired man with a military bearing, probably in his mid fifties. Leopold remembered seeing his picture in the papers the previous year when his daughter had died. He'd started an Internet company in the city about ten years earlier, and done quite well at it before the bloom wore off. It was still profitable, and Leopold knew he was on the board of some local companies.

"Captain Leopold," he said, holding out his hand. "It's a pleasure to meet you at last."

Leopold accepted the hand but said at once, "You know kidnapping is a felony."

"Please hear me out before you consider bringing charges. I have tried several times to phone you, as recently as today."

"Your daughter drowned in a boating accident last year. I'm very sorry about that, but there's nothing I can do to help you. If you

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have evidence of a criminal act, you should contact Captain Fletcher. I've been retired for some years."

"I have contacted him and gotten nowhere. You are my last hope. I only want you to listen to my story."

Leopold saw that he had little choice. "All right," he agreed. "I'll give you one hour, but it's still kidnapping."

The woman who'd been driving the SUV, Marilyn, entered the study. "Do you need anything else right now?"

"No, my dear."

"He'll need you in one hour to drive me back home," Leopold said.

Drexel and the young woman exchanged glances and she left the room. "Marilyn is my other daughter," Drexel explained. "Sarah's sister."

"Who was the hood in the car?"

"Hans, my gardener. I hope he didn't injure you."

Leopold sighed. "I told you the first time you called that I have no connection with the police anymore. I'm retired."

"But in your day you were the best there was. I was new to the city then, but I remember the press reports of your cases."

Leopold glanced at his watch, thinking how worried Molly must be at his strange absence. "You have fifty-five minutes more before I walk out of this house."

"Certainly. Could I pour you a glass of wine?"

"No, thanks."

Arthur Drexel walked over to the piano and lifted a framed photograph off it. "This was my lovely daughter Sarah, age eighteen. She graduated from a private high school last June and was planning to follow Marilyn to Skidmore for the fall semester. During the summer she took a job with an insurance firm here in town."

The girl who stared out of the photograph at Leopold was indeed lovely, with a pert nose and sly, tempting eyes that seemed to embody both innocence and experience. She appeared older than eighteen, with a slender body like her sister. "If I remember correctly, she drowned in a boating accident," he said again.

"That was the newspaper story, Captain. It was toward the end of summer, the week before she was to leave for college. One of the men she worked with at the insurance agency had a yacht, a powerboat he took out on the Sound. He invited Sarah and two men for a cruise. Sarah described it to us as an office outing and, naturally, we assumed there would be other women and possibly even wives present."

"But there weren't."

Drexel shook his head. "Only the three men and Sarah. Shortly after ten they radioed the Coast Guard that she'd gone swimming and couldn't be found. The following morning her body washed up

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on the beach. She was nude. The medical examiner ruled the cause of death was drowning, but there was a bruise on her head. I believe she was murdered."

"You've spoken to Captain Fletcher about this?"

"Naturally. He just keeps asking for evidence. I told him Sarah was an excellent swimmer, the star of her high school's swim team. She wouldn't have drowned."

"But if it was dark, she may have become disoriented, unable to find her way back to the yacht."

"She wouldn't have been swimming alone to start with, not after dark and without a suit. And there was that bruise on her left temple which no one could explain."

"She hit something in the water," Leopold told him. "Maybe even the side of the boat. And the bathing suit could have come off as she struggled to stay afloat."

"One or more of those men attacked her, I'm sure of it! They threw her body overboard to cover up their crime."

"If that's the case, the medical examiner would have found some evidence of it."

But the white-haired man shook his head. "Her body had been in the water overnight. All he could tell me was that she—that she was sexually active. No father likes to hear that about a daughter who's just out of high school."

"Who are these three men?" Leopold remembered the newspaper account but hadn't paid particular attention to it.

"Wayne Runnymede. He's the agency president. The other two were Foster Hayes and James Gillette. Two are married and Hayes is divorced, all twenty to thirty years older than my daughter."

"It does seem like an odd arrangement for an office outing," Leopold admitted. "What story did they tell the police?"

"That they were playing cards and having a couple of beers. Sarah was wearing a bikini from an earlier swim and she decided to jump in the water to cool off. That was the last they saw her."

"What was the alcohol content of her body?"

"Fairly low, consistent with a beer or two. Sarah wasn't much of a drinker. She wasn't even of legal age yet."

Leopold spread out his hands. "I'm afraid there's nothing here, Mr. Drexel. You've got no case. Whatever happened on board that yacht, you're never going to know about it unless one of them changes his story. You can't expect the police to bring charges against anyone on the basis of your or your wife's suspicions."

"My wife is dead," he announced grimly. "She was already in ill health from cancer surgery and what happened to Sarah was just too much for her to bear. She died last month. Marilyn has been after me since Sarah's death to find out the truth about it and

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after my wife died I agreed to do just that." He shook his head. "I'll never forget that call from the police in the middle of the night. At first I couldn't believe it. Her car was out front and I thought she was safe in bed."

"I'm very sorry about your wife. And Sarah. But that doesn't change the fact that you have not a shred of evidence to back up your assertions."

From among the papers on his desk Arthur Drexel produced a manilla envelope, which he opened, removing a single sheet of paper. "As you may know, Captain Leopold, I sit on the board of Traders Trust Company. One of the three men from the yacht, James Gillette, has an account there. In January, five months after Sarah's death, he deposited ten thousand dollars in cash to his account. Could that have been hush money?"

Leopold glanced at the statement printout. "You used your position on the bank's board of directors to obtain this information? Isn't that highly irregular?"

"My daughter was murdered, Captain. I'm certain of it, and so is Marilyn. She's been after me since this happened. We want justice done, at any cost. You may bring charges against us for kidnapping you, if you wish, but that doesn't change our determination."

"The hour is almost up and you haven't convinced me."

Drexel sighed. "We won't hold you here against your will. But before you leave please speak with my daughter. Perhaps she can do more to persuade you."

"Very well."

He pressed a button on his desk and the young woman who'd driven the SUV entered the study. "Talk to him, Marilyn," he said. "Maybe you can convince him."

She smiled slightly as she replaced her father behind the desk. Close up, in the lighted room, he now saw that she was older than her sister, possibly in her mid twenties. Her face was attractive without being beautiful, and she spoke with just a touch of Boston in her voice.

"I'm sorry we had to resort to this, Captain Leopold," she began. "We mean you no harm. You can't imagine what these last nine months have been like, with my sister's drowning and then my mother—"

"Do you really believe Sarah was murdered?"

"Yes, I do. Those men on that yacht did something to her. They have to be punished for it. If the police can't do anything, if you can't do anything, I'm afraid my father will do something drastic on his own."

"Marilyn—may I call you Marilyn?—you have to understand that there's not the least bit of evidence of foul play in your sister's death."

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"Have you talked to Captain Fletcher about it?"

"No, I don't make it a habit to second-guess him on current cases."

"Would you do that, at least? My father is willing to pay for your time."

"Whatever I do, I couldn't accept any money from him."

"But you will look into it?"

"I'll speak to Fletcher," he agreed with a sigh, more to gain his release than anything else. "But I don't expect I'll find anything. Where can I reach you during the day, Marilyn?"

"I'm a paralegal at White and Jenson. You can call me there."

Molly was waiting up when he arrived home at nearly one o'clock. "Where in heaven's name have you been? Why did you have to attend a meeting?"

"I didn't have much choice. I was kidnapped."

"What?"

He told her about it, somewhat embarrassed by the entire episode. "A few years ago I could have knocked that gardener into the next county. Now I'm just a helpless old man."

Molly would hear none of that. "Stop feeling sorry for yourself and tell me about this."

"Both father and daughter are convinced Sarah Drexel was murdered last summer. I promised I'd talk to Fletcher about the case."

"I hope you'll tell him you were kidnapped."

"Once I was at the Drexel house they made no effort to hold me against my will. It probably wasn't a felony kidnapping."

Molly sighed. "You're getting involved in something again, aren't you?"

"I hope not."

"It's late. Come to bed."

True to his promise, Leopold drove downtown on Wednesday morning to police headquarters. Fletcher was upstairs when he arrived, and he spent twenty minutes chatting with Lieutenant Connie Trent about mutual friends until the captain returned. "Good to see you," Fletcher greeted him. "You should come by more often. I'll get us some coffee."

They settled down in Leopold's old office with Fletcher behind the familiar desk. "I'd like to think this is just a friendly call, but knowing you, it's probably more than that."

Leopold agreed that it was. "Arthur Drexel grabbed onto me last night after the concert. I went out to his house." He explained about the pseudo-kidnapping.

"Drexel! That man has been a pain in the butt ever since his daughter drowned. He keeps trying to convince me she was mur-

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dered, without any evidence to back up his charges. I can't go around hauling in people for no reason. We have enough cases to investigate as it is."

"Anything interesting?"

Fletcher shrugged. "A man's body turned up in the woods after the snow melted last month. Gunshot wound to the head. The body was too decomposed for immediate identification, but we hope his teeth or DNA will show something. It was probably a killing over drugs. We have them all the time."

Leopold nodded. "I read the papers."

"The papers don't tell half of it. They're selling drugs to school kids, nine, ten years old. We got an elementary school on the South Side, you know the neighborhood. One of the drug dealers had his own kid there and he put out the word to the other dealers to stay away from that school. It was a matter of pride with him, protecting his own kid. Last year Narcotics grabbed him and sent him away for a long time. Now the drugs are in that school, too, a reefer in the fourth-grade bathroom, a vial of crack on a third-grade kid."

"It's a changed city, a changed world," Leopold agreed. Then, "What did the autopsy say about Sarah Drexel?"

Fletcher reached into his desk drawer. "See for yourself. I dug it out when he started calling me. There was a blow to her temple that could have knocked her out, maybe when she dove from the boat. But there's no doubt she drowned."

"What about sexual activity?"

"Inconclusive. She'd been in the water too long to tell anything for sure, but there was no evidence of recent activity."

"Did you recover her belongings from the yacht?"

"Of course. Here's the inventory sheet."

Leopold skimmed down the page, remembering how many times he'd seen sheets like this in the past. Purse with lipstick and handkerchief, wallet, driver's license, thirty-four dollars in cash, beach bag with a bikini bathing suit, towel, and sunscreen, panties, bra, blouse, jeans, socks, and sneakers.

"What time did the yacht start out?" he asked Fletcher.

"I've got it right here." He flipped quickly through the reports. "A little before seven. Josh Mintnor, the marina owner, interrupted a meeting to see them off himself, so he's sure of the time."

"Mintnor? Didn't we have some trouble with him years ago?"

"One of his employees went to prison on a drug charge but we couldn't make a case against him."

"It would have been getting dark by seven o'clock in late August," Leopold mused. "She wouldn't have needed the sunscreen, but maybe she kept it in her beach bag. What time was their call to the Coast Guard?"

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"It was recorded at ten-oh-five, made by Wayne Runnymede, the yacht's owner. He said she'd been in the water about thirty minutes at that time."

"They claimed she was wearing her bikini when she dove in, but it was still in her beach bag."

"I thought of that," Fletcher said. "Runnymede said she'd brought along two suits."

"I wonder why."

"Maybe one of them fit her better."

Leopold sat and pondered, as he might have done in the old days. "Isn't it more likely she went swimming nude? And doesn't that imply some sort of sexual activity?"

Fletcher seemed doubtful. "That's a long jump without any other evidence. Young people do a lot of crazy things these days."

Leopold told him about the money James Gillette had deposited to his account. "Arthur Drexel thinks his daughter was murdered and the guilty party paid off the other two to keep them quiet. I'm going to ask Gillette about it."

"Even if it's true, he'd hardly admit it."

"There's something you could do for me, if you would. Check the bank accounts of the other two men. See if either one made a similar cash deposit in the months following Sarah's death."

"Do you really think there's anything to this? I can't go around asking to see bank records for no reason, and I've no grounds for a court order."

"There are ways it can be done," Leopold reminded him. "I'm going to call on Gillette and then I'm going to take a look at that yacht."

"It's been in dry dock for the winter," Fletcher told him. "Runnymede hasn't used it since the drowning."

Leopold gave him a little smile. "You're not as disinterested as you pretend."

Runnymede Associates, one of the city's larger insurance agencies, had its own office building on the fringes of downtown. Leopold asked the receptionist for James Gillette, but he was out of the office. "How about Mr. Runnymede?"

She rang his phone and asked, "Your name, please?"

"Captain Leopold."

She repeated it into the phone and within a minute Wayne Runnymede appeared. He was middle-aged, stout, with thin hair graying at the temples. "Captain Leopold," he said, all smiles, "I believe we met briefly at some civic function a few years back. Come in! What can I do for you?"

Leopold followed him into the spacious office and took a seat. "First I should tell you that I'm retired from the Department."

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"Oh, I thought—"

"You thought it was about Sarah Drexel's death last year. It is, but I'm here unofficially."

"It was a terrible tragedy. The girl's father has been haunting me ever since. I even offered him a cash settlement if he felt I was in any way responsible as her employer. But he seems intent on accusing me of deliberately killing her."

"I know," Leopold told him. "He's asked me to find some evidence of foul play."

"There's none to be found. It was a tragic accident."

"But there are some irregularities. Her swimsuit, for instance. Your story was that she was wearing it when she dove off the yacht, but it was found in her beach bag."

The stout man thought about it, weighing his reply carefully. "I told Captain Fletcher I believe she had two suits."

"Why would she bring two?"

"I don't know."

"Could you take me to see the yacht?"

"It's in dry dock for the winter. I'm having it painted."

"This is May," Leopold reminded him. "Winter's over."

Runnymede looked pained. "After what happened, I don't want any part of it. I told the marina owner I may sell it and he's made me a generous offer."

"I'd still like to see it."

"If you're retired from the Department, what's your interest in it?"

"Sarah Drexel's father has been pestering me, too. I promised him I'd look into it."

"There's nothing to look into. It was an accident."

"The bathing suit bothers me," Leopold admitted. "If she was wearing one, then she brought two with her. If she was nude, there's a strong suggestion of impropriety, either on her part or yours."

He nodded. "All right, I'll take you out to see the boat. I hope that will satisfy everyone."

Leopold followed him out to the reception area, where a blond man with a briefcase was collecting his phone messages from the girl. "Oh, Mr. Gillette, this is Captain Leopold. He wanted to see you earlier."

The man turned with a ready smile, perhaps expecting a customer. "What can I do for you?"

"Perhaps we should speak in your office." He turned to Runnymede. "I'll just be a minute."

Once inside the small office, Leopold came quickly to the point. "Arthur Drexel has asked me to investigate the death of his daughter last August."

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"It was a terrible accident, but I don't know that I can contribute anything new."

"You must realize that if anyone tried to threaten or bribe you to keep quiet you would have an obligation to report it to the police."

"No one—" He was cut off in mid sentence by Wayne Runnymede's entering the office.

"Ready, Captain?" he asked, glancing at Gillette. "I can't be away for long."

"Let's go. We'll finish this later, Mr. Gillette."

Outside, walking toward their cars, Runnymede asked, "Finish what?"

"I'm trying to speak with all three of you who were aboard the yacht that night."

"It might be difficult in the case of Foster Hayes. He's no longer with the company."

"What happened to him?" Leopold asked.

"He moved on, out of town, I think. Left us unexpectedly, without notice." He paused at a sleek silver Mercedes. "Will you follow me to the marina?"

"Fine."

The Neptune Marina was located on a little inlet of Long Island Sound at the southern edge of the city. It was owned by a man named Josh Mintnor who'd been a fixture on the local boating scene for some twenty years. As Fletcher had reminded Leopold, there'd been a drug case involving an employee many years back.

Runnymede and Leopold parked their cars and walked past lines of boats still covered with blue plastic shrouds against the winter storms. "With this great weather, most of these will be in the water by the weekend," Runnymede predicted. "There's Josh now."

"Thinking about taking her out for a spin on the Sound?" Mintnor asked as they approached.

"Not today, Josh. This is Captain Leopold, retired head of the police Violent Crimes squad."

"We've met," Mintnor replied stoically.

Leopold shook the man's gnarled hand. "Good to see you again, Josh." His face was tan and weathered, hinting at a season in the sun, and there was a short growth of graying beard along his chin. Though probably close to fifty, he had the handsome features of a younger man, accented by the shabby white captain's hat he usually wore. Leopold pictured him enjoying a winter in the tropics. "I hope you're not here on business," Mintnor said without changing his expression.

"My business days are over," Leopold assured him. "Just wanted to have a look at the yacht."

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"Let's both take a look," Runnymede said. "I'm interested in seeing the new paint job."

The insurance man's yacht proved to be a good-sized powerboat with a galley and sleeping accommodations for five. Mintnor had painted the hull white with a thin red bootstripe. The name on the transom was *Branwen,* who Runnymede explained was a Welsh sea goddess.

"Looks good, doesn't it?" Mintnor said. "If you do decide to get rid of it I hope you'll consider my offer."

Leopold followed the insurance man up the ladder to the deck, carefully watching his step. Mintnor headed back to his little office. "Did you take it out much last summer?" Leopold asked Runnymede when they were both on deck.

"Almost every weekend if the weather was good."

"But that last time was on a weeknight, a Thursday, I believe."

"Well, it was an office thing, after Sarah's last day before she started college."

"How many times had she been here before?"

Runnymede shot him a glance. "Never, Captain."

"I was just wondering if that second bathing suit might have been left from a previous visit."

They went down the companionway steps to the galley. "This is the aft cabin with its bunk and head. My wife and I usually sleep here, and there's a forward stateroom with two berths and a head for guests. There's also a settee berth if we need it."

"So the three of you and Sarah Drexel could have spent the night on board."

His expression hardened. "We were planning to be back before eleven. This was no sort of orgy, despite what Sarah's father might think."

Leopold was looking around, opening the icebox and a hanging locker. "You pretty much cleaned everything out," he observed.

"Don't you need a search warrant for that?" Runnymede asked.

Leopold smiled. "Not anymore. I'm retired, remember?" He walked over to the settee in the main cabin and pulled it open to reveal the extra berth. On top of it lay both parts of a pink and blue bikini bathing suit. A tag on the back was lettered "MED," though the suit seemed small to his masculine eyes. "What's this?" he asked.

"I have no idea how that got here," Runnymede insisted.

"Was it the suit Sarah was wearing when she dove off the boat?"

Obviously flustered, he could only answer, "I'm not sure."

"There was one suit in Sarah's beach bag and here's a second suit. Are you telling me she was wearing a third bikini when she dove off the boat?"

"I didn't actually see her jump," Runnymede admitted. "She

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might have been nude."

"Who did see her?"

"I don't know. Maybe no one."

Leopold sighed. "I have to tell you I'm beginning to think there's some foundation to Arthur Drexel's charges. You haven't been entirely frank, Mr. Runnymede."

"I don't—"

"Which one of them killed her? Was it Hayes or Gillette?"

"Sarah's death was a terrible accident," he insisted.

"Or was it you?"

"I told you the truth, Leopold. We radioed the Coast Guard and helped them search for a while. Then we docked the yacht just after eleven and all went home."

"Was Sarah's car still in the parking lot?"

"I suppose so, I didn't notice. My car was there, along with Foster's and James's. And there was a Jeep that Mintnor drives."

Leopold picked up the bathing suit and started for the steps. "You'll be hearing more from me."

He was almost back to the car when he decided to stop in at Josh Mintnor's office. The marina owner was on the phone, assuring someone that his boat would be ready for launching on Saturday morning. "Finished already?" he asked Leopold as he hung up.

"Just about. We found another bikini on board."

"Really? I thought I went over that craft pretty carefully for Mr. Runnymede. He was in terrible shape after the accident and that was the least I could do. Of course Captain Fletcher and his crew had already been on board."

"I'm more interested in the time they sailed. Do you keep any record of things like that?"

He shook his head. "Summertime, we have yachts in and out all day long. I make a little check in the logbook if I can, but I don't record the times. With Mr. Runnymede it's a bit different, though. He's a special friend, sent me a lot of customers, helped me out when I was in trouble."

Leopold knew what he meant. "The drug charges."

"Yeah. He had his own lawyer handle it and I was grateful."

"So you saw him that evening?" He consulted his notebook. "August twenty-second?"

Mintnor agreed. "I was meeting with a real-estate consultant about purchasing some adjoining property to expand the marina. I excused myself for a few minutes when I saw them drive up."

"How many cars did they have?"

"The girl drove herself, as did the others. They all arrived at about the same time. I walked them down to the dock where the *Branwen* was moored, and even helped cast off the lines before returning to my meeting."

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"All four of them were aboard?"

Mintnor nodded. "Runnymede, Hayes, Gillette, and Sarah Drexel. I knew them all except for the girl."

"When did they return?"

"Shortly after eleven. I'd gone home around nine, but they told me later the Coast Guard vessel could do little in the dark except shine its light on the water. They planned a full search at daybreak, but by that time her body had washed up on the shore."

Leopold nodded. "Are you going to buy the *Branwen?"*

"I've offered him a good price for it, more than it's worth. I'd like to take it down the Inland Passage to Florida next winter."

"Good luck." Leopold left the office and went back to his car, putting the bathing suit in the glove compartment.

When he reached home Molly had arrived just ahead of him. "The judge adjourned my client's case till Monday. More delays. Did Fletcher reach you?"

"No. Is he looking for me?"

"He called twice on my cell phone. Said it was important."

Leopold went to the phone and punched in the familiar number. "Fletcher? Leopold here."

"I've been trying to reach you all afternoon," Fletcher said. "Remember I mentioned a man's body we'd been unable to identify?"

"I remember."

"We have a dental match with a possible missing person. It's Foster Hayes, one of the men on the yacht with Sarah Drexel that night."

Thirty minutes later Leopold was standing beside Captain Fletcher in the county morgue. "He was killed sometime during the winter," Fletcher said. "We didn't have much snow, but there was enough to cover the body until the spring thaw. The reason it took so long to identify him is that his neighbors and ex-wife thought he might have moved to the West Coast. He quit his job without notice and just dropped out of sight. Recently, his landlord discovered some of his clothes and personal belongings still in the apartment and reported that to us. I was also checking the bank records, as you requested. There'd been no activity in Hayes's account since early March. I decided to look at his dental records and they matched our unidentified corpse."

"You said earlier the man had been killed by a gunshot wound to the head."

"That's right."

"Any idea who did it?"

"Sure. How does this sound? Your friend Arthur Drexel became convinced that Hayes killed his daughter. Maybe he paid Gillette

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that ten thousand dollars for the information. Neither Hayes nor Runnymede had any large deposits to their accounts. Drexel killed Hayes and kept on pestering us about his daughter's death simply to remove suspicion from himself."

But Leopold didn't buy it. "He might have made a few phone calls to us, but kidnapping me was going a bit far. I'm convinced Drexel and his daughter are desperate to find the killer."

"If there is one. My second idea is that the killing of Hayes may be completely unrelated to Sarah Drexel's death, maybe another drug killing."

"I don't buy that one, either, at least without evidence."

Fletcher was undaunted. "I'm full of ideas. Runnymede killed her and bought off Gillette with the ten grand. He couldn't buy off Hayes so he killed him."

"It's a possibility," Leopold admitted. "I have some unfinished business with Mr. Gillette in the morning." He told Fletcher about finding the second bathing suit in the closed settee berth on Runnymede's yacht. "Any possibility you could have missed that?"

Fletcher looked abashed. "A good chance," he admitted. "I think I searched that area myself, but I didn't know the settee unfolded into an extra bunk."

"Will you be questioning Runnymede?" Leopold asked.

He nodded. "I'm on my way out there right now."

Much to Molly's dismay, Leopold was up with her at seven. They had a rare breakfast together and drove downtown in their separate cars before nine o'clock. "You act as if you're still working," she told him as they left the house. "Can't you do some gardening or something?"

"Now you must be kidding me," he replied. "I can't take that suggestion seriously."

He arrived at Runnymede Associates just as James Gillette was pulling into a parking space himself. "I've already talked to Captain Fletcher," he told Leopold. "Foster's murder is a terrible thing, but I know nothing about it. He'd talked of moving west and when he didn't come in one day Wayne and I just assumed he'd done that."

"Was it Foster Hayes who caused Sarah's death?"

He moistened his lips before replying. "No. No one caused her death. It was an accident."

"How did it happen?"

"She dove overboard in the dark and hit her head on something. That's what we've said all along."

"What about the ten thousand dollars you deposited to your account a few months back?"

"A friend repaid a loan."

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"Can you give me his name?"

"It was a personal matter, unconnected with any of this other business."

"Did it occur to you that Arthur Drexel may have killed Hayes because he was on the yacht that night? He might kill you or Runnymede next."

"That's crazy!"

Leopold leaned toward him. "You've got to tell us the truth, Mr. Gillette."

Another car pulled into the parking lot and Runnymede got out. He seemed unhappy to see Leopold. "Now what?"

"It's still about Sarah Drexel's death, even more so now that Hayes has been killed."

"I talked to Captain Fletcher last night. You're retired. I don't need to answer your questions."

"If someone caused Sarah's death last August, it gets down to one of you. Unless you want to pin it on Hayes now that he's dead."

Runnymede pulled Gillette away. "Come on, Jim. You don't need to talk to him."

Leopold had no answer to that, and they went inside. He got in his own car and remembered he'd stowed the second bathing suit in the glove compartment. He should have turned that over to Fletcher, but then another idea struck him. Driving back home, he got on the phone to Skidmore College in Saratoga Springs.

Identifying himself as Captain Leopold and not bothering to mention the retired part, he asked the admissions office for information on Sarah Drexel. "She was registered as a freshman for last fall's semester," he said.

"Here it is, Sarah Marie Drexel. I have a notation that she's deceased. Some sort of boating accident, if I remember correctly. She never started the term."

"I believe her older sister graduated from Skidmore a few years back. Marilyn Drexel?"

"You'll probably have to check the alumni office for that. No, wait a minute, I have it here. Marilyn Edith Drexel, class of 'ninety-nine."

"Thank you," he told her and hung up.

What did it mean? What did it mean?

The offices of White & Jenson occupied the top two floors of an ornately remodeled downtown office building. The elevators, at least, were modern, and the following morning Leopold was whisked to the top in a matter of seconds. He waited in the skylit reception area while Marilyn Drexel was summoned.

She came out wearing a conservative gray pants suit and red

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blouse, carrying a yellow legal pad for making notes. "I hope this means there've been some developments, Captain."

"I believe so, yes." They sat down together on one of the leather sofas. "As you know, your sister's body was found unclothed, though Mr. Runnymede insisted she was wearing a bikini when she went for her nighttime swim. It's possible, but doubtful, that it came off during the few hours she was in the water, especially since her bathing suit was found in her beach bag on the yacht. Yesterday, while searching the yacht in the company of Mr. Runnymede, I discovered this second bikini, in a folded settee. The suggestion was made that Sarah brought two suits because one fit her better." He opened his briefcase and took out the second suit while she sat impassive. "That suggestion ignores the most likely and logical explanation. There were two bikinis on board because there were two women in the party."

"But that's impossible!"

"I think not, Miss Drexel." He showed her the label with the letters MED printed on it. "I thought the suit was a bit small to be marked medium. Those are your initials, Marilyn Edith Drexel, and this is your suit."

"I wasn't there!" she insisted, but Leopold bore down hard.

"You were there! What sort of outing would it have been with three men and one woman? I know sisters might sometimes borrow each other's suits, but when I showed it to you just now you made no effort to claim it. Sarah invited you along and you went, taking your bikini. You drove there together, which explains how her car got back home that night. There were no keys among her possessions on the boat. You insisted from the start she'd been murdered, and hounded your father to keep after the police, all because you were there."

She took a deep breath. "I was there earlier," she admitted, "but not later, when she was killed."

"Tell me everything that happened."

Marilyn Drexel put down the yellow pad, as if resigned now to her fate. "I knew them because I'd stopped by the office to pick up Sarah after work a couple of times. When Runnymede suggested the farewell party on his yacht he told her to invite me, too. It sounded like fun, so I went along. Sarah and I drove down together."

"But didn't tell your father?"

"No," she admitted. "I live at home but I have a life of my own."

"Go on."

"Everything was fine at first. All three of the men were friendly and there was lots to eat and drink."

"Any drugs?"

"No, nothing like that. But after a few drinks I could see the

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party was beginning to get a little rough. I went down to the cabin to change into my swimsuit and Foster Hayes followed me down. He pulled open the settee berth and tried to push me down. I slapped him and got away, but forgot my bikini. Up on deck I demanded that Runnymede take us back to the dock. I wasn't going to have me or my kid sister exposed to this sort of thing. Sarah said I was being unreasonable, that they were just out for a good time. We argued about it, but I told Runnymede I'd report it to the police if he didn't take us back."

"He was kidnapping you, just as you kidnapped me."

"It wasn't the same," she assured him. "When we got back to the dock I left the yacht but Sarah refused to come with me. She said it was her party and she was staying. What could I do? She was out of high school, with a mind of her own. I took her keys and drove home alone."

"What time was this?"

"Around quarter to nine."

"Did you tell your father any of this?"

"Of course not," she said, close to tears. "The next morning they found her body. I knew that Hayes or one of the others must have killed her, but I couldn't tell my father I was there without admitting I'd gone off and left my kid sister to be assaulted and murdered. All I did was keep pressing him to hound the police and finally to bring you into it. It's been a nightmare for me ever since last August."

"Perhaps the nightmare is almost over," Leopold said.

A bit later he drove down to the marina and parked near Josh Mintnor's office. Mintnor was inside, looking over a navigational chart as he entered. "Leopold! You're getting to be a regular here, twice in three days!"

"I wanted to ask you a few more questions regarding Sarah Drexel's death." Leopold sat down across from his desk.

"I've told you everything I know," he said, rolling up the chart he'd been studying.

"Not quite everything. You admitted to accompanying Runnymede's party to the dock and helping them cast off their boat, but you never told anyone that Sarah's sister Marilyn was also in the party."

"Who? Marilyn? I guess I didn't notice her."

"She came with Sarah. They were together. You couldn't have missed her."

He shrugged. "I'd have no reason to lie about it."

"Just one reason that I can think of. If you'd told the police Marilyn boarded Runnymede's yacht they'd have wanted to know when she left it."

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Mintnor seemed to grow exasperated. "Look, Captain, whatever happened on that yacht, I know nothing about it. I was in the midst of a meeting when the *Branwen* cast off. I only came out for a few minutes to be sociable."

"But when they returned to the dock a little before nine you would have been just closing up. You also didn't tell us that part. After Marilyn fought with her sister and left, they urged you to come aboard, didn't they? And you went."

"That's crazy!"

"Is it? Then why was your car still in the parking lot when the boat returned at eleven? Runnymede happened to mention that."

Mintnor was silent for a moment, considering his options. "All right, I was there. She'd had too much to drink and fell off the boat. It was an accident."

"She'd only had a couple of beers. The autopsy confirmed that. You tried to molest her, possibly rape her, and she fought back. You hit her, knocked her out, and threw her body over the side."

"That's not the way it was," Mintnor insisted. "She was walking around naked. Naturally I took that as an invitation. We were standing by the railing. She scratched my face and I hit her. She went over the side. We spent a half-hour trying to find her before we called the Coast Guard."

"And then you offered to buy off the three witnesses so Runnymede let you hide below deck. Gillette got ten grand and you were buying Runnymede's yacht for more than it was worth. Only Foster Hayes wouldn't take the bribe so you killed him when you feared he might go to the police."

"The guy had a conscience. Can you imagine an insurance agent with a conscience? He tried to grab Sarah's sister earlier himself. That's why she made them take her back to the dock. But I'd been in trouble before over that drug business and I knew Fletcher would throw the book at me even though I didn't mean to kill Sarah. I lost my head and shot Hayes, then dumped his body in the woods."

He reached into a desk drawer and Leopold instantly tensed. "Don't try anything foolish, Mintnor."

But when his hand came out of the drawer it was holding not a gun but a packet of hundred-dollar bills. "Here's the ten thousand I offered Hayes. It's yours if you forget this whole thing."

Leopold smiled and shook his head. "Your time's run out, Mintnor. I'm wearing a wire and Captain Fletcher has been outside listening to our little conversation."

Later that afternoon, when he returned home, Molly asked him how his day had been. He thought about it and said, "I think it's the best day I've had since I retired." Then he went in to phone Marilyn Drexel. ●

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THE TALKING DEAD

by Melodie Johnson Howe

"And last but not least I would like to thank my father, who loved his booze more than me. But when he was half-sober and feeling melancholy, he would take me out in the backyard at night and teach me to talk to the moon. Thanks, Dad." Tears filling his eyes, Brendan Kincaid raised his Golden Globe in the air and bowed to the audience, the TV cameras, and the world. I adjusted my pearls and black silk suit jacket and forced an appropriate smile. Even for an actor, Brendan Kincaid cried too easily.

As the ballroom filled with applause I peered around the glittering centerpiece on the table and nodded at Alison, Brendan's wife. Kneeling in front of her like a suitor about to propose marriage was a man in a tuxedo, balancing a camera on his shoulder, capturing her tired but triumphant expression.

"Oh, Diana, Brendan is so sensitive," the young—some say too young—actress who played Brendan's TV wife gushed into my ear.

I am one of those who say she is too young. But that's because I tried out for the role of Brendan's wife and didn't get it. I wasn't age-appropriate, meaning I was too old, meaning I was Brendan's age.

"I love how he talks about his life. Don't you?" She beamed. I nodded politely even though I didn't agree. Brendan talked about his life as if no one else had one.

The fickle cameraman moved away from Kincaid's wife and focused on the young actress. She began to applaud wildly. I know all the tricks of the acting trade, but again I marveled at how

"We don't see enough of this kind of clever, classy writing anymore," the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* said in reviewing Melodie Johnson Howe's second novel. *EQMM* concurs, and we regret that the author writes so little. Her two novels, *The Mother Shadow* (1989) and *Beauty Dies* (1994), were followed by a half-dozen short stories in the late '90s, several of them in a series featuring actress Diana Poole. Ms. Howe knows the business of acting, for she was once in movies and TV herself. ¶

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quickly tears appeared in her creaseless eyes. If there is one more awards show, I thought, Hollywood will drown in its own tears of adulation. Maybe I was too old.

Sitting on my right was Theodora Woods; she had just accepted her own Golden Globe for being the creator of the newest, hottest sitcom: *The Life of Brendan Kincaid.* She also happened to be Brendan's lover. I was her guest at the table. Theo liked my work and always made sure there was a part for me in her shows. I nodded and smiled at Theo. The cameraman now pointed his lens at her. But she wasn't applauding and she wasn't smiling. As the star-filled audience, clad in tuxedos and evening gowns, got to their feet giving Brendan a standing ovation, Theodora remained seated; her intelligent dark eyes shined with betrayal. Her short dark hair was cut at sharp angles. Her mouth, lipstick long forgotten, was pressed into a thin resentful line. The cameraman, not one for nuance, lurched away toward another more easily identifiable face.

"What's wrong?" I whispered in her ear.

"TV saps your soul." She downed the last of her wine and placed her napkin firmly on the table. The thin strap of her purple velvet gown slipped from her bony shoulder as she stood and stalked with great purpose out of the Grand Ballroom. A frown deepened the lines around Alison Kincaid's eyes as she watched Theo leave. In shock, the young actress's tears dried immediately as if they were made out of polyester.

Theodora Woods forgot to take her award.

People don't walk out in Hollywood. They are pushed out, kicking and screaming and clutching their multimillion-dollar golden parachutes. So when Theo got up and left during a standing ovation for the star of her show, it was an unsettling event. Even Brendan was rendered speechless upon his return to the table. It was quickly decided that Theo must not have been feeling well and I, her friend, should take her award home for safekeeping. They considered me her friend because Theo got me work.

Since my husband Colin died of a heart attack I live alone in our unremodeled beach house—euphemistically called a teardown—in Malibu. That night I placed Theo's award on the mantel next to Colin's two Oscars, which he had won for best screenplay. The two awards and the house were all I had left. Having to earn a living, I had gone back to what I knew best: acting.

I called Theo and got her machine. After leaving a message, I crawled into bed, took my sleeping pill, and turned on the TV. There was nothing I wanted to watch; I just wanted to fill the silence even while I slept. Closing my eyes, I wondered what Theo was doing. She wasn't the kind of woman you worried about; but her behavior, even for a writer, was odd.

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The next morning I was standing in my kitchen drinking coffee and channel surfing my way to the news when on some obscure station I saw the shocking image of myself at eighteen. I was acting in a segment of *Bewitched.* Samantha, the witch, was wiggling her nose, trying to turn me into an ugly old hag so Darrin, her husband, would not be attracted to me. I no longer knew that young blond-haired woman who was once me. Her face was filled with such hope and beauty that she broke my heart. She also looked young enough to be Brendan Kincaid's TV wife. The doorbell rang. Pulling my husband's paisley silk robe more tightly around me, I ran my hand through my now determinedly blond hair and went to answer it.

Brendan Kincaid burst in. "Where is Theo?"

"I don't know."

Brendan was tall and woodenly handsome. He reached out his arms in a hopelessly dramatic gesture that reeked of bad acting; it was his larger-than-life mannerisms, which had no connection to the reality of the moment, that made Brendan such a comic success on the small screen.

"I've been calling her all night. I keep getting the machine. I went to her house this morning and she's not there." He peered forlornly down at the little alligator insignia on his pink polo shirt as if it might help him.

"Maybe she's already at the studio," I offered.

"I tried her office. Nothing. Nobody has seen her. I thought she might've come here to pick up her award."

"No." He followed my gaze to the fireplace mantel.

"You put her award with Colin's Oscars?"

"I thought her sense of irony might like that."

"Are you saying my show is beneath the writing of the great Colin?"

"Yes." You could be honest with Brendan because he never listened to what you said.

"I've been up all night," he groaned. "I need a cup of coffee."

He followed me into the kitchen and slumped in a chair. "What happened, Diana? Why did she get up and leave like that? The Golden Globes, for God's sake, and just as I'm getting a standing ovation. I mean, it was her standing ovation, too. I was gracious in my acceptance speech, wasn't I?" His big brown spaniel eyes pleaded with me.

"Mentioning your father was very touching. As usual, you were very charming, Brendan."

"What do you mean, as usual? You've never liked me, have you?"

"I don't know what Theo sees in you."

"Since Colin died you've turned into a very bitter woman, Diana Poole. It's not my fault he left you with no money."

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"Money never mattered to us. You're married, Brendan."

"So? If that's your reason for disliking a man you must . . ." Again he waved his arm dramatically in the air, searching for the words to finish his sentence. Letting his arm fall to his side, he gave up the search. I handed him a cup of coffee and sat down across from him. He took a sip and stared at the TV.

"You watch *Bewitched?*"

"No. I was channel surfing and saw my—"

"Who is that?"

"Who?"

He leaned forward, squinting at the young me on the screen. "The blonde. The voice is familiar."

"Are you being funny?"

"God, she's gorgeous. Can you imagine what she looks like now?"

"No, I can't."

He dragged his hand through his thick brown hair, leaving it askew. This gesture always brought gales of laughter from the TV audience.

"Do you realize that every one of those stars on *Bewitched* is dead now?" he said bleakly. "I mean, if you think about it, they're just dead people talking."

"Sounds like something Theo would say." I grabbed the remote and turned the TV off. The young me vanished.

"I said it. Not Theo," he snapped.

"All right. You said it."

"What do you mean, 'I'm married'? Is that why Theo walked out? She wants me to divorce Alison? Did she tell you that?"

"No."

"Then what did you mean by that crack?"

"It wasn't a crack. It's a fact. You are a married man. And it's taking a toll on Theo. Not to mention your wife."

"Oh God, this should be the happiest morning of my life but I have you moralizing at me, and I can't find Theo. What possessed her, Diana?"

"When you were in her house, did you look in the closet and see if she packed some of her clothes?"

"How would I know? Theo isn't the kind of woman that makes you pay attention to what she wears. In fact, she has awful taste in clothes. Did you see that purple thing she was wearing last night?"

"Did she take a suitcase?"

He shrugged helplessly.

"I'll go look. I have a key."

"You have a key?"

"She's five houses down from me on the beach. I look after her place while she's gone and she looks after mine."

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"Yes, but I didn't know you had a key," he said in a proprietary voice.

"When she's traveling I pick up the newspapers and water the plants. She does the same for me when I'm on location. What's wrong with that?"

"Nothing, I just didn't know, that's all. I think of it as our little hideaway. Hers and mine."

"It's her home, Brendan. She bought and paid for it."

"Why do you resent me?" He rested his chin in his hand.

"In all honesty? I don't know. You're charming. You have a wonderful way of expressing yourself, and an inept way of acting that people respond to. Theo says she loves you. Your wife stays with you. Your fans adore you. By all rights, I should like you, too, but I don't."

He eyed me suspiciously. "Did you talk her into leaving me?"

"Nobody talks Theo into anything."

"That's true. She must've said something, Diana, when she got up and left last night."

"She said: 'TV saps your soul.' "

" 'TV saps your soul'?"

"Yes."

"TV?"

"TV."

"What does it mean?"

"I think it means that Theo is tired, burnt-out. The last time we had lunch, she mentioned she wanted to get away and write her novel."

"A novel?"

"A book."

"I know what a novel is. You don't have to be so condescending."

"I'm sorry. You bring it out in me. She probably went away to think."

"Either way, I lose."

"There are other writers, Brendan."

"Not like her."

"There are even other lovers."

"Do you really believe I don't care for her? That I could just transfer my needs and affection to somebody else? I don't think you know what Theo means to me. She gave me the strength to talk about my father last night. She brings things out in me I never thought were significant. She sees the significance in me."

All actors feel inferior. So when an actor finds someone, especially a writer, who sees the worth in him, that is much more important than mere love. I know. I was an actor married to a writer.

"Did you two have an argument?" I asked.

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"No. Yes, but not about us, about words."

"The show?"

"It was about the way I say my lines, or her lines. She's very possessive about her lines."

"Writers are protective of their words."

"It's just dialogue, Diana. Nothing more. You don't think she's had a breakdown, do you?" He buried his face in his hands. "Oh God, I can't go on without her."

"Actors always go on."

He peered over his fingertips at me. "Did you just make that up? I mean, just now, off the top of your head?"

"Yes."

"That was very funny," he said, not laughing. "But do you think it's true?"

"That actors always go on? Yes."

"I hope you're right. 'TV saps your soul.' How could Theo say that? It's given me mine."

"TV has given you steady work, money, and fame, Brendan. But not your soul. I'm not so sure you have one."

He smiled his charming lopsided grin. "Sometimes I think you know me best, Diana."

I smiled back. You couldn't help it with Brendan. He took another sip of his coffee, then spoke with a dark finality. "That was an omen."

"What was?"

"You watching the rerun of *Bewitched.* Dead people talking." He got slowly to his feet and wandered out of my house.

Later I walked down the beach to Theo's and let myself in with her key. In the living room her sparse, expensive, stiff-backed furniture looked stoic and prim, like lonely women who have waited too long to say yes. The house was heavy with silence. But her house was always quiet. I, who must have the TV or music on all the time, once asked her how she could stand the silence. Theo pointed to her head and said, "It's not quiet in here. I'm a writer. I love it." I had laughed, remembering my husband sitting in the stillness of his office; a room I hardly go into anymore. And now there was no Theo, with her eyes turned inward, moving gracefully through her silence toward her office.

I quickly went into her bedroom and searched through her closet. Her suitcase was gone and so were some of her clothes. I heard the front door open and close, then hurried footsteps in the hall. I waited, listening. Drawers were being opened and slammed shut in her office. I crept down the hallway and peered in.

Brendan Kincaid was taking papers from her filing cabinet and placing them into a large plastic trash bag.

"Hello, Brendan." I leaned against the doorjamb.

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"God, Diana, you scared the hell out of me. I didn't see your car."

"I walked down the beach. I told you I was going to check to see if she took a suitcase with her."

"Did she?" He dumped some folders into the bag.

"Yes. What are you doing?"

"I don't think she's coming back."

"You didn't answer my question. What are you doing taking her papers?"

"I've written her love letters. I don't think that's anybody's business but mine. I want to find Theo. Not cause my wife embarrassment."

"You wrote a trash bag full of love letters?"

"And the scripts are mine, just as much as they are hers." He stuffed more papers into the bag. A card fluttered to the ground.

"You're acting like she's not coming back, Brendan."

"I don't think she can forgive me."

"For what?"

"Stealing . . . her love." Throwing the trash bag over his shoulder, he lurched down the hallway and out the front door.

"You have no right to take any of this, Brendan," I foolishly yelled after him, but he wasn't listening.

In Hollywood, everybody has a right. It's all about rights: the rights of the stars, the rights of the director, the rights of the producer. Even the rights of the lover. It's all about how many rights you can accumulate in your contract or how many you can steal.

I picked up the card he had dropped. It was a warm and fuzzy drugstore card declaring eternal love and was signed by Brendan. Where love letters were concerned, he was certainly no Browning. I checked the back of the card to see if he had sent her a Hallmark and discovered the words: "Dead people talking." They were written in Theo's hand. And they were the exact words Brendan had used this morning when watching *Bewitched.* I placed the card on her desk.

It was a Hallmark.

That night something jarred me out of my sleep. My heart pounding, I sat up, feeling another's presence in my room. I quickly turned on the light. It was only W.C. Fields in the movie *David Copperfield* falling downstairs and announcing that he had arrived. As usual, I had fallen asleep with the TV on. I felt comforted by Fields until I remembered he was one of the dead people talking. I got out of bed, threw on a robe, went into the living room, and opened the sliding glass door. On the deck I breathed in the heavy salty air and watched the dark waves turn white as they splattered on the shore in the moonlight. I gazed down the beach toward Theo's house. A light shone in the window. Had she come back?

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I slipped into some shoes, threw on a coat, got her key, ran down the beach, and let myself in. In the dark I made my way through to her office. Alison Kincaid was going through Theo's computer disks.

"Hello, Diana," she greeted me. Her face was strained and pale. "Thought you'd be asleep. Brendan is not computer literate. Didn't think to get her disks." She looked through them with a clerical precision.

"What's all this about, Alison?"

"Theo's not coming back. At least not to Brendan."

"How do you know?"

"He received a postcard from her. It was placed in the mailbox, not sent. It has a picture of the Grauman's Chinese Theatre on it. Do they still call it Grauman's?"

"I think it's a Loews now. Who knows what they call things anymore."

"Here, read it." She whipped it out of her pocket and thrust it at me. It read: "Brendan, you tried standing in mine, now you're going to have to find another pair. Here's a graveyard full of them." I turned it over. It was a postcard of all the old movie stars' footprints.

"He's frantic, Diana." Alison opened her tote bag and dumped the computer disks into it.

"What possible use can her personal writings be to you?" I grabbed a yellow legal tablet out of her hand. "You can't just take anything you want."

"I have to fill a void!" she snapped, pointing a bony, manicured finger at me. Her gray eyes were desperate. "Fifteen years ago I married the most beautiful actor in the world. A handsome void. I thought I could fill him with love. I couldn't. When Theo came to him with this idea for a show he slowly began to change. Then he started to have an affair with her. That's when he became a different man. The man that I had always wanted. Witty and sharp. Why do you think I put up with the affair? I don't want to lose that witty and wise man, Diana. I have to help him."

"Help him do what?"

"Fill the void." She snapped her bag shut and walked briskly out of Theo's house.

I sighed and leafed through the yellow legal-size tablet; it was a writer's sketchbook. There was a brief description of a woman having coffee. Ideas for different books. Observations. Overheard conversations that Theo had jotted down. From her desk I took the greeting card Brendan had given her and turned it over. "Dead people talking." Why had she written that phrase on Brendan's card? Did she think he was one of the dead people? Or did she just use the card to make her writer's note? I replaced it and took the

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yellow legal pad home with me. I fell asleep looking through it while *David Copperfield* found that his first true love was not all that she was cracked up to be.

The next morning I was standing in my kitchen watching the local news when the image of Brendan Kincaid appeared in a room filled with microphones and reporters. He announced that he was asking the police for their help in finding Theodora Woods. He looked exhausted and scared. Why was he so frightened? At the end of the news conference he peered into the camera and said, "I know this may sound odd coming from me, but I think it's important to say. TV CAN SAP YOUR SOUL. It's such hard work, you don't get to see your loved ones, and there is always the pressure of the next show. I think, I hope, that Theo is somewhere getting in touch with her soul again and that she will soon return to us and those who love her. Come back to us, Theo. With your soul intact."

A few hours later, Brendan called me. "Have you heard anything?"

"No."

"She's not coming back. I have to adjust. Prepare."

"For what?"

"My wife said she ran into you last night."

"You mean while she was ransacking Theo's office?"

"We don't want you to mention that to the police when they talk to you. Remember, Diana, you need to work in this town."

"Is that a threat?"

"I don't know. It seemed the appropriate thing to say."

"Appropriate? Brendan, can you hear yourself?"

"Oh God, I'm so lost without her."

"Are you aware that you used Theo's words as your own in the press conference?"

"What do you mean?"

" 'TV saps your soul.' "

"How can you be so petty at a time like this?" He hung up on me.

I poured myself another cup of coffee, put on a CD of Willie Nelson croaking about love, sat down in the living room, and went page by page through Theo's notepad. I was looking for a clue, a hint of why she had walked out. Under the title *A Life* I read: My father was a drunk. He loved the sauce more than he loved me. But when he was half-sober and feeling melancholy he would take me out in the backyard and we would sit on the damp grass while he taught me how to talk to the moon.

Had she written down a vignette from Brendan's life or from her own? I stared at the Golden Globe sitting on the mantel. It looked as if it had been moved. Did Brendan pick it up when he was

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here? I couldn't remember. At one o'clock I had an interview for an antacid commercial. So I went and changed into what I call my good-wife clothes: slacks, pastel-colored print blouse, and Keds. In the script, my dopey husband didn't know when to stop eating.

It was six o'clock when I returned to the house. After the interview I had run errands and gone to the market. I didn't get the commercial. I guess I wasn't that good of a wife.

Late that night, sipping a glass of wine, I walked out onto the deck and again looked toward Theo's house; it was dark. I wondered just what Theo was doing by putting that postcard in Brendan's mailbox? Was she playing some kind of cruel psychological game with him? If so, she didn't have to leave town for that. Now that Brendan and his wife had ransacked her files, the last place anyone would look for her very late at night would be her own home. I got her key and my flashlight.

"Theo?" I called, entering her house. My light bounced around her living room. "Theo?" I moved down the hallway to her bedroom. "Theo?" I turned the overhead light on. Brendan Kincaid lay on her bed surrounded by more of Theo's papers, his arms splayed out in one of his helpless gestures. Blood ran from a dark hole in his temple down his neck and into his shirt collar. On the floor by the bed was a gun. I leaned against the wall for support. The poor guy looked as if he had been sitting on the bed studying her writings as if they were Cliffs Notes, as if he had a test he knew he wasn't going to pass. I stumbled back down the hall and to the phone in the kitchen.

Three hours later, wearing my husband's bathrobe, I sat alone in my living room. I had told the police everything I knew. Alison was called. She had recognized the gun as belonging to Brendan. The two detectives were talking suicide. I offered to go home with Alison but she refused.

"You were Theo's friend, not Brendan's," she had told me. "Theo caused his suicide. She wanted it to happen."

But why? And where was Theo? Staring at her award on the mantelpiece, I realized I had been sitting in complete silence. I had forgotten to turn on the TV or my CD player. Folding my arms across my chest, I stood in front of the fireplace. The two Oscars were sleek in their art deco, streamlined, gold-plated nudity. The Golden Globe looked bold in its artlessness. A chill ran through me. The award had been moved. Even Theo couldn't resist touching it.

I walked slowly, like a pallbearer, through my kitchen to the room that was once my husband's office. Trembling, I opened the door and quickly flipped on the light. His desk chair was at a quarter-turn, as if he had just stood up. My photograph was still on his desk. The computer screen was blank. The daybed appeared

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to be untouched. The small bathroom still had the faint smell of Colin's cologne. I breathed it in, feeling the pain of loss once more. I opened the door that led out to the side of the house. The walkway was as it should be. Everything was as it should be. And yet something was wrong. Colin's room did not have the feel of a forgotten place. There was the sense of someone having recently been in it. Of the stillness having been broken.

I took Theo's award from the mantel and went back to my room. I placed it on my nightstand and got into bed. I turned off the light. I didn't turn on the television. I didn't take my sleeping pill. I stared at the shadows on the ceiling and waited in the dark, terrifying quiet. I'm not sure how much time had passed when I saw Theo's slim figure in my doorway.

"It took me awhile to figure out what was wrong," she said in her low soft voice. "No TV, no Willie Nelson. No white noise."

"You were counting on my fear of silence." I sat up and turned on the light. We blinked as if seeing each other for the first time. She wore black slacks and a black sweater. Her small sharp face was drawn. Her intelligent eyes looked dull. I'd never seen her eyes look dull before.

"I was only taking advantage of your fear. Why are you so afraid, Diana?" She stayed in the doorway.

"Just like Brendan, I'm trying to fill a void. The void death makes."

"I liked staying in Colin's room. It was like sleeping in a shrine."

"You've been here all the time?"

"Yes. I hope you don't mind. I just needed to be where nobody could get at me. Haven't you ever felt like that, Diana?" She tilted her head and attempted a smile.

"I think you needed to be in a place where you could commit a murder and nobody would know."

"What are you talking about?"

"Brendan's dead."

"Brendan? I don't believe it." She sagged against the doorjamb; writers should never act.

"Writers should never act," I said.

She pulled herself up to her full height.

"That's better."

"How did he die?" she asked.

"The police think he committed suicide in your house. But I don't believe he killed himself. Of course, they're waiting to talk to you." I swung my legs around and sat on the edge of the bed.

"How can you think I would do such a thing? My God, did Brendan think I was never coming back?" she asked.

"Maybe it was the postcard you sent him."

"I was angry at him, but not enough to kill him, Diana."

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"You knew I rarely went into Colin's office. You knew I hated a silent house. What did you do with your car? Park it on a side street?"

"Unless you have proof, I wouldn't go around saying things like that. You know how this town talks. Besides, what's my motive? Brendan was making me a fortune, and he was my lover."

"Brendan would have left you with nothing to write about."

She laughed harshly. "That's hardly a motive, Diana."

"But it's true. Dorothy Parker said, 'I require three things in a man. He must be handsome, ruthless, and stupid.' Well, that was your Brendan. And you liked that about him. But the more successful he became, the more he felt he needed to talk off-screen like he did on-screen. He began to repeat things you had shared with him about your life as if they were his own, didn't he?"

Rubbing her forehead, she paused for a moment, then said evenly, "I thought I had found what every writer, hell, every woman, hopes for. A lover who is a good listener. But I got suckered. I would hear him at parties talking about his father, but it was really my father. His father drank diet cola and ate macaroni and cheese and never said an interesting thing in his life. My father was a drunk but at least he talked to the moon. Brendan would make a witty observation, everyone would laugh, but it was my observation. How do you tell a person at a dinner party, that's not really Brendan speaking, that's me? You can't without sounding like a petty idiot."

"He needed to fill his own void. That's what his wife said."

"She knew him better than I did. I began to realize he was stealing my life, my creative life, so he could fill his empty one. You're correct about one thing, Diana. I was afraid I'd have nothing left to write when I sat down to start my novel. I couldn't shut him up. I couldn't stop him. I tried, but he just didn't see the problem. It was all dialogue to him."

"But you did stop him."

"Nobody will believe that I killed Brendan. The golden goose never gets killed in Hollywood."

"You killed this one. You got him to come to your house. That would be easy. But how did you get his gun? That's the only part I can't figure out."

"Are you telling me he shot himself with his own gun? He must've used the gun he gave me. Brendan didn't like the thought of me alone at the beach without protection. Diana, I've been good to you. I've given you parts in my shows that other actresses your age would kill for."

"Well, this show is over, isn't it? You've seen to that."

"I'll write other shows, other parts."

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"But Theo, even with Brendan dead, you still won't be able to write your novel."

Her dull eyes glimmered briefly with the pain of recognition. "Why do you say that?"

"If TV saps your soul, what does murder do to it?"

"TV is worse. Trust me." She grinned wryly. It was Theo at her ironical best.

"I want my key back."

"Sure." She reached in the pocket of her slacks, took the key, and dropped it on my dresser.

"Yours is there in the glass bowl."

She took it.

"Don't forget your Golden Globe."

Theo picked it up and weighed it in her hand, staring at me all the time.

"Are you thinking of killing me, too?"

"No, you have no proof. Except that Brendan was sucking all my creativity out of me. And who is going to buy that as a motive in Hollywood? People get paid for doing that here. It's called synergy."

"Alison Kincaid may think as I do."

"No. She loved the man Brendan had become. The Brendan I had created. She wouldn't want his image tarnished."

"Where are you going to go?" I asked.

"To the police. Tell them how shocked I am. And hope that my silly behavior wasn't partly to blame for his suicide. But sometimes, Diana, a woman just needs to get away. She just needs to pull her thoughts together. Good night."

I made sure Theo had left and then I went back to bed. I turned on the TV. Bette Davis was talking. On reruns of his show, Brendan Kincaid would soon be talking again. Now Theo, too, was one of the talking dead; she just didn't know it yet. Cold, I pulled the covers up around me and watched Bette Davis blow smoke. ●

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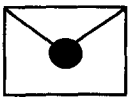

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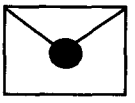

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Art by Laurie Harden

THE PLATER

by Ann Cleeves

The land was east-coast flat, washed by floods, so the ditches were full and the fields on either side of him greener than he could remember. It was a familiar road, long and straight and narrow. He'd picked up the Saab in Hull that afternoon and now he was on his way home. He'd spend the night at the cottage before delivering the car to a showroom in Coventry early the next day. He liked his own bed; it was better than sleeping in the vehicle or a cheap B & B and it didn't add much to the mileage. From Coventry he'd hitchhike to Bristol, taking his trade plates with him, and collect an Audi for Liverpool. That's what he did for a living; he drove other people's cars from one end of the country to another.

It was July and hot. The ditches steamed as the water evaporated, and the road disappeared into a heat haze before it turned a corner so it seemed to go on forever, straight and flat to the horizon. Way ahead of him was a small, squat bus, but there was no other traffic. The verges on each side of the road were lush and untreated: reeds in the dykes and cow parsley so tall that it formed

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a hedge. He drove slowly. There was no rush. Since he'd lost Suzy there was nothing to hurry home to.

Ahead of him a small drama was being played out. The bus slowed to a stop and a couple of schoolkids jumped off. Lads with shirts hanging out and scruffy sports bags. As they chased up a farm track a woman appeared. The plater thought she must have come from one of the tarted-up cottages set back from the road, but the bright afternoon sun shone straight into his eyes and he couldn't be certain. Suddenly she was there, a black, mad silhouette, running and waving after the bus. It was clear to the plater that the driver hadn't seen her. He indicated and drove on. She stood for a moment looking after the bus, as if she could drag it back towards her just with the power of her will. Then she gave up. In a single gesture of defiance she turned to face the oncoming traffic, planted one foot firmly ahead of her, and stuck out her thumb.

Married to an ornithologist, Ann Cleeves chose a birding couple for her first fictional sleuths. But when she moved to the northeast of England in the late '80s she was inspired by the locale to start her Inspector Ramsey series. Place is always important in her mysteries, and she believes the north of England is "the natural setting for the traditional detective novel." Her keen sense of local atmosphere is evident in this story, which won the CWA's gold dagger. ✝

He would always stop for other platers. That went without saying. A rule as fixed as his contract with the agency. He needed the others to get him home on the dark, wet nights when he stood at motorway junctions, just as they needed him. But he never picked up anyone else. The students and the soldiers on leave and the motorists who'd broken down could find their own way home. He hated making conversation. He'd chosen this job because it had given him the chance to be on his own.

But this time he stopped. He was drugged by the heat and the sun in his eyes, and something of this woman reminded him of Suzy. Besides, he seemed to have no choice in the matter. Although he had already driven past her, he stopped and reversed. For the first time he saw her clearly. She was older than Suzy, at least ten years older, smaller, more delicate. Her hair was fine as rabbit fur, faded blond, pinned up with a tortoiseshell comb so her neck seemed long and thin enough for him to put one hand round. Her brown eyes had sparks in them. He leant across the passenger seat and opened the car door for her. Until then, she'd made no move to get in.

"Where are you going?" he asked.

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"Town?" A question. Or a riddle. Surely she knew where she wanted to be.

It was further than he'd intended taking her, past where he lived, but he nodded. When he'd opened the door he'd smelled the humid air—a mixture of cows and ditchwater—and then her perfume.

She got in quickly, as if she were worried that he'd change his mind. Or that she'd change hers. She was wearing sandals and a blue, sleeveless dress printed with silver stars. There was pink polish on her toenails, a scattering of freckles on her shoulder. The dress rode up when she stepped in and her leg was brown and smooth. No freckles there. She was clutching a bag made of purple velvet patchwork on her lap. It would have been big enough to contain everything he needed for an overnight stay, including a lightweight sleeping bag and a couple of maps. But he didn't think it would do for a woman. Even Suzy had needed a rucksack when she went on the road. The smallness of the bag confused him. He didn't understand what she intended. If she was planning to go all the way into the big town she wouldn't be back before nightfall. She seemed to have left home in a hurry, without any thought.

"God," she said. She shifted her hips so she was comfortable in the leather seat, lifting her buttocks and pulling down the dress. "It was never that easy when I was young."

He stared at her but she didn't move again.

"Hitching, I mean. I thought I wouldn't stand a chance at my age."

"Aren't you worried?" he asked slowly. "Hitchhiking on your own?"

"It's not something I do every day. The last time was when I was a student. Twenty years ago. And the rest! But when the bus drove off, I thought, " 'Sod it. Why not?' "

"I saw you think that. That was why I stopped."

She turned and looked at him. "Did you? How very perceptive."

He could feel his face prickle with a blush so he put the Saab into gear and pulled off. Still there were no other cars.

"I'm running away," she announced. Her voice wasn't loud but it was clear. If you were at one end of a church and she was at the other, and she whispered, you'd still hear every word. He wondered what had made him think of churches, because he hadn't been inside one since Suzy's funeral, and that was a whole year before, almost to the day. He allowed himself to take his eyes off the road for a moment to look at his passenger. Was she serious? He suspected she was laughing at him. Under the clear voice, he thought he heard laughter.

Then she did give a little chuckle out loud. "I'm running away

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from my husband. He'll come home from work and no one will be there. No one to pour him a drink or cook his dinner."

He didn't say anything.

"You're shocked."

"No." Of course he was and she could tell.

"Perhaps you think you should drive me straight back."

"Only if you want me to." Part of him had wanted her to say yes. He was already regretting the impulse to stop. No more complications, he'd told himself after Suzy. But trapped by the car, her perfume was stronger, heady. She played with the velvet of her bag, squeezing it into pleats with long, supple fingers.

"No," she said. "Really, I don't." More gently she added, "I'll probably only run away for one day. Teach him not to take me for granted. Tomorrow I'll go back and cook the supper like a good little wife."

It occurred to him then that perhaps Suzy had only meant to run away for one day and that she'd intended to come back to him. The thought winded him as if he'd been kicked in the chest. He fought for breath. The woman seemed not to notice his distress.

"One day of adventure," she was saying. "Time out. That's all I want."

A tractor-trailer pulled out of a lane in front of him. He overtook it smoothly.

"What's your name?" he demanded. The question was too abrupt. He could hear that as soon as the words were spoken. The image of Suzy as she might have been, apologetic on the doorstep, stopped him thinking straight.

"Belle."

"I had a girlfriend called Suzy." Why had he told her that? Conversation didn't work this way. He'd got it wrong again. You had to talk about things no one cared about, at first at least. And anyway, it was dangerous to bring up the subject of Suzy. He wasn't sure he could remember the story.

The woman seemed not to notice he'd broken the rules. "Did you? What happened to her?"

"She walked out one night."

"Like me," Belle said.

"But she never came back."

"Oh," she said in the whisper that would fill a church. "I'm sorry. That's so sad."

He looked at her again, expecting to find her mocking him, the smirk, the "Isn't he dumb?" pity he usually provoked. But she seemed moved by his loneliness. He thought she understood it. Perhaps she wasn't being frivolous in running away. Perhaps she didn't have a marriage worth saving. She touched his arm, a gesture of sympathy, and there was a sort of dreaminess in her eyes.

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He wondered fleetingly if he might feature in her adventure. He might make it more special for her.

"Town then, yeah?" He tried to keep his voice natural, though a croak had developed. He wished he was wearing something different. Not the jeans he'd bought in the market for a fiver and the checked shirt with the frayed collar. He wished he'd had a shower before leaving home.

"Why?" she asked. "Where were you going?"

"Home." The other words came as a mumbled rush. "You could come, if you like. I could make you some tea. I've got herbal. I'll take you into town later." Suzy had liked herbal. It would still be all right, wouldn't it, wrapped up in its foil packet, even after a year? As he waited for the woman to reply, he felt as if he were growing, that his limbs were getting longer and more awkward and clumsy, that he was taking up so much space in the car that there was no air left for either of them to breathe.

She hesitated and he knew she was thinking back to her young days, when she'd taken risks and gone hitching on her own and talking to strangers. He realised that was what he'd been banking on: her leaving her middle-aged wifely caution behind.

"Herbal tea," she said gently. "Why not?"

So he looked in his mirror to check the road was empty, and indicated and turned into the track.

Belle adored the cottage. That was what she said when she first saw it. He'd known that she'd like it. Suzy had been hooked by it, too, when she'd first wandered up the track. "Wow," she'd said. "It's, like, really fairy-tale. Hansel and Gretel." Love at first sight.

It was made of old brick and flint. A red-tiled roof which came so low that he could easily reach the black, cast-iron gutter with his hand. Outside, a sawhorse and a pile of logs, a couple of feral hens, a place to park his cars. Inside, four rooms, unchanged pretty much since his mother's day, but tidy. He didn't like clutter. And a neat extension that he'd built on the back. He didn't invite Belle inside. Not yet, he thought. He'd have to be careful with her. They stood for a moment looking at the house. The low sun threw their shadows ahead of them. His seemed enormous in comparison with hers. Not Hansel and Gretel, he thought. Some other story.

"But it's magic," Belle said. "It can't have changed for a hundred years."

"Of course it's changed." He spoke more sharply than he'd intended but he felt defensive. "There's a bathroom now. Suzy needed a bathroom." He wanted to explain what a job that had been, the cesspit and the plumbing, but thought better of it. "And there's a phone. I need a phone for work."

"It's not just the building," Belle said. "It's the quiet." He listened to sounds he didn't usually hear. Water in the field drain. The

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sandpaper scratching of a hen. A wood pigeon. She shut her eyes and he saw a spider's web of fine lines around them. As he watched, the lids lifted and she looked out past the row of coppiced willow to where cows grazed. The quiet had bothered Suzy in the end, but it seemed not to trouble Belle.

"Tell me about your work." She turned and smiled at him. He felt faint again, like when he'd first smelled her, and stood up to compose himself.

"I'll make the tea first. That'll be best."

It had been sunny when Suzy had arrived, but that had been a winter late-afternoon sun in a pink and grey sky, with a frost starting to form. He'd been out to fetch logs and she'd appeared at the end of the track. He'd stopped, still bent over the barrow, and watched her come closer. She'd been dressed in black leather and carried a crash helmet under her arm and he was reminded of a film about aliens in spacesuits. It was that strange to see anyone there. But she was on her own and there wasn't a flying saucer in sight. He'd straightened as she came up to him.

"Can I use your phone?" she'd said. "I came off my bike. Frozen surface water. The road's dead greasy." But she wasn't looking at him. She was looking at the cottage, grey now that the sun had gone, icicles hanging from the eaves. That's when she made the comment about the fairy tale.

He'd invited Suzy in immediately because he couldn't keep her outside when it was freezing, and that was what she was there for, to use the phone. She'd reminded him of that as he stood holding the rubber grips of the wheelbarrow, staring at her. "You do have a phone?" Stamping her fat leather boots up and down to tell him how cold she was. And besides, she was different from Belle, more confident, with her curious eyes and her voice demanding attention and answers.

He would have been shy in a stranger's house, but Suzy had wandered through it touching and probing, running her finger over the back of the chair where he sat in the evening, making him open the little gate in the bottom of the range to show where the fuel went, picking up a teacup to look at the pattern on the side.

"Is it just you here?"

"Since Mother died."

"Don't you mind being on your own?"

"Sometimes . . ." he'd hesitated. ". . . Sometimes I'd prefer the company."

The next day she'd turned up with her stuff. He'd heard the motorbike coming down the track, so loud he could feel the vibrations through his feet and it was as if the foundations were shak-

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ing. It seemed she'd had a row with her boyfriend. She described it, but the plater wasn't listening.

"You don't mind?" she asked. A challenge. "I mean, you did sort of say . . ."

He hadn't been able to speak, dizzy with disbelief and delicious indecision. She'd stood on the square of carpet in the parlour. "Of course, I'll need a bathroom." And softened the demand by taking his hand and tilting her head and standing on her toes to push her tongue between his lips. Then stroking his hair in a way that was almost tender. By then the indecision was over. He had no choice.

"Tell me about your work," Belle said again, and he left winter behind and returned to the smells and the sounds of a July afternoon. She was sitting on a wooden bench set along the front wall of the house. One of the smells was of roasting wood preservative. He'd made the tea and put it on the bench beside her, then sat on the grass, not wanting to crowd her. He knew his size sometimes intimidated. She'd wanted to bring out the tray but he was still reluctant to let her into the house. If he'd left Suzy outside that first time, offered to make the phone call on her behalf, he wouldn't have this guilt which he carried round in his gut like a permanent bellyache. He tried to push Suzy out of his head, but it was difficult because, despite their physical differences, the women had become blurred in his mind. Perhaps he had been more upset than he'd realised by the anniversary of Suzy's death.

He saw that Belle was waiting for him to answer. He stumbled into an explanation of what it was to be a plater.

"Do you enjoy it?"

"Oh yes," he said. "It's the cars. How could I drive a car like that otherwise? And it's the maps, too. You move across the map in a different line each day." He stopped, realising he was using almost exactly the same words as when he'd first described his work to Suzy.

"I've seen the platers," Belle said. "Men at motorway junctions carrying trade plates? They must have been. I didn't know what they were doing. You don't really take any notice, do you? They all seem to look the same." She was excited. It was as if she seldom came across a subject she knew nothing about. "And so organised . . . It is a man thing, I suppose. Not really a suitable job for a woman."

"There was one woman."

"Was there?" Excited again. A pause, a flash of inspiration. "Not Suzy?"

How could she have guessed? "She enjoyed coming out with me," he said slowly.

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"She would. Of course." Belle was looking out beyond the cows to the horizon. He waited for her to go on but she seemed lost in thought.

"At first that was enough. She loved the fast cars. She was wild about speed. I drove too fast for her because that was what she wanted. She sat beside me, shouting, 'Faster! Faster!' Like a kid on a ride at the fair. But it couldn't have been enough. Without telling me, she contacted the agency. She fixed the insurance and the contract. Without telling me." His voice sounded too loud, a sort of booming in his ears, and he tried to control it, to become reasonable. He didn't want to scare Belle away. "I came in one night and she wasn't there. She'd left a note. She was delivering a VW to Wolverhampton and bringing back a People Carrier. Working as a plater. I lay awake, listening for the engine, watching for the headlights on the bedroom ceiling. When she got in, she said I was daft for being anxious."

"Perhaps she felt trapped," Belle said. "She wanted her own life."

"Her own life?" he demanded. "What does that mean? It wasn't safe, what she was doing. My nerves were ragged with waiting for her night after night. And all the time I was working I was wondering where she was. In the end I told her: 'If you work as a plater, you don't live here.' "

"So she went?"

"She packed up her clothes and left while I was at work." He hesitated. He didn't know how much more to say. But it was a story and stories needed endings. "Two days later the police were here. Two of them. A grey-haired bloke and a girl so young she looked as though she should still be at school. I'd heard their car and I'd thought it might be Suzy, so it threw me, seeing the uniforms standing there. She was dead. Hit-and-run. She'd been hitching on the motorway. I'd always said she should get the train once she'd delivered the car. . . ." He'd told it well, he thought. Well enough.

Belle touched his hand and squeezed it gently a couple of times, as she'd squeezed the velvet bag when she was sitting in his car.

"You can't blame yourself."

"No? Maybe not."

"Did they ever find the driver?"

The guilt got him again, weighed him down so it was a struggle to stand up. "No," he said. "They never found out who did it." He remembered the police officers, standing on the doorstep, looking round the yard for a car which had already been delivered to Stamford.

Now he was on his feet, looking down at the top of her head. He saw the stray hairs escaping from the comb, the long swan's neck. "Look," he said. "Why don't you come inside?"

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The next day the plater drove the Saab to Coventry, then stopped for an early lunch at a transport cafe close to the M4. Not part of the usual routine, but the weather had changed. There was a blustery west wind and sudden squally showers. The cafe was an ugly house built of raw yellow brick with a concrete pull-in where trucks stopped overnight. Inside, it was all smoke and steam and the smell of fried food. Condensation ran in streams down the window. Someone had left a paper open with the mucky pots on the only empty table. The plater began to read.

The article, on an inside page, was about the search for a woman. She had last been seen by two schoolboys running for a bus on a country road. After that, it seemed, she'd disappeared. The police were anxious to trace her. Early the previous evening a neighbour had discovered the body of her husband in the cottage where they'd lived. The man had been strangled, and by implication the woman was prime suspect in a murder enquiry. There was a photograph, which the plater studied carefully, even holding it up towards the flickering strip light, but it was grainy and blurred. It could have been of any middle-aged woman.

Belle folded the newspaper carefully, ran her finger along to straighten the crease, and felt a stab of injured pride. She would have liked to tell the lorry drivers slumped over their sweet teas and ketchup-splattered chips. To shout her cleverness out loud. Not one murder. Two. Thanks to the plater, she'd disappeared, become invisible, nothing but a woollen hat and a waterproof coat.

And no one would find his body for months. Who ever went to his cottage? Who cared about him? Not the agency when she'd phoned them and told them he didn't want to be considered for work for a while. Not after the Saab. The woman at the end of the phone had sounded relieved if anything. He would have been slow at the work and difficult to deal with. No loss.

Belle wiped the grease from her face with a paper handkerchief. The rain had stopped. She hoisted her velvet bag onto her shoulder, stuck the trade plates under her arm, and made her way outside. She stood at the cafe entrance and stuck out her thumb. She only had to wait two minutes before a lorry pulled up. ●

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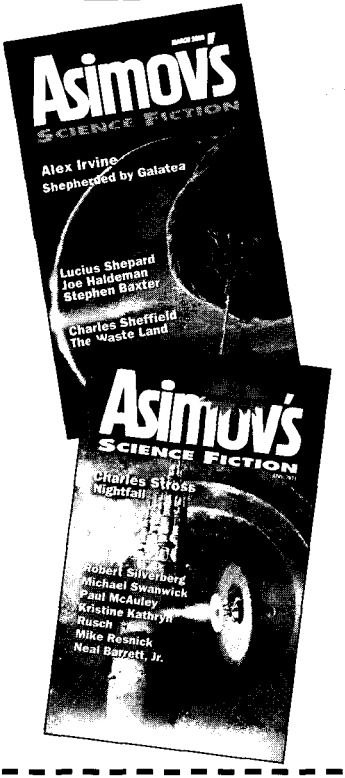

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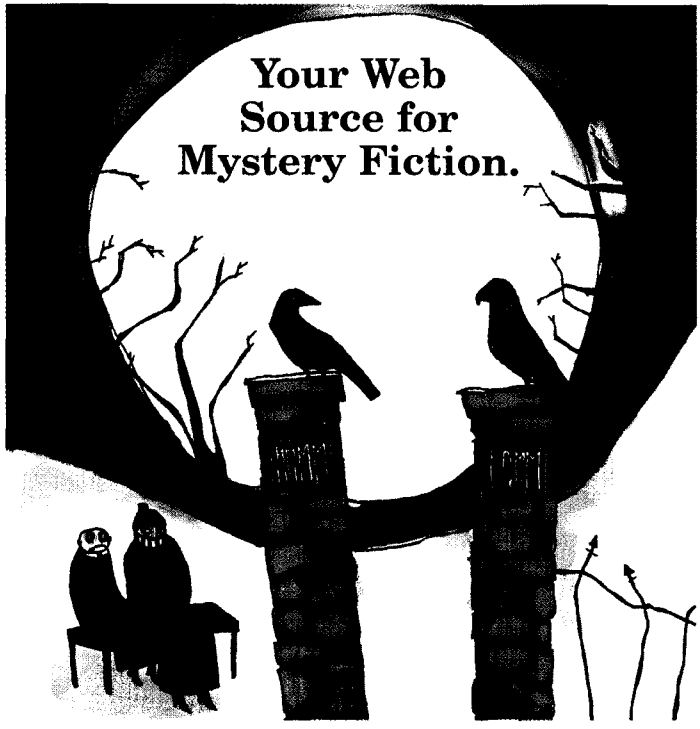

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